

A WORLD OF APPEARANCES: SPERONE SPERONI AND THE DEBATE OVER
SOPHISTRY IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the works of Sperone Speroni degli Alvarotti (Padua 1500–1588), his re-evaluation of ancient sophistic perspectives and his legacy in the early modern age. Although international studies on the subject are taken into consideration, this research is mainly conducted through a systematic exploration of ancient and early modern primary sources. The rigorous and direct analysis of the texts is a consistent practice for determining results. The subject of this research, at the intersection of Italian literature and philosophy, requires an interdisciplinary approach throughout the dissertation. Speroni was one of the most important protagonists of the Renaissance debate on language and logic as well as civil and speculative philosophy. Educated as an Aristotelian, he eventually developed a distinctive literary and philosophical production and was the first to challenge Plato's (327-447 BCE) condemnation of sophists. Still, despite the fact that Speroni was a central figure of Renaissance philosophy and literature in the vernacular, he is one of the most neglected authors in international scholarship. Furthermore, scholars have considered Speroni's interest in ancient sophists as a marginal aspect of his *oeuvre* and have disregarded the paramount role of the period's vernacular writing on sophistry that began with his works and spread throughout sixteenth-century Italy. This four-chapter dissertation fills the gap in international studies, being the first monograph dedicated to Speroni written in English and the first work written in any language investigating the fundamental role of the ancient sophistic tradition in the Italian Renaissance. The first chapter analyzes fifteenth-century authors' translation and comments on works related to sophistry. The second examines Speroni's works that argue for the rehabilitation of the ancient Greek

sophists. The third explores Speroni's sophistic writing in the form of double arguments and paradoxical dialogues. The fourth chapter focuses on the debate about sophistry and its relationship with literature and arts in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century, which also involves the quarrel about Dante's poetry. The conclusions summarize the most relevant aspect of the dissertation and present further paths for research in different fruitful direction. Christopher Celenza and Walter Stephens have been the advisors for this dissertation.

PREFACE

Between my first doctoral degree earned in Italy and my current doctoral research project at Johns Hopkins University, I taught history and philosophy in Italian *licei* for several years. As a teacher I realized that Renaissance culture is not an easy subject to both teach and learn. Antiquity and modernity fitted into the yearly program as a sequence of very manageable philosophical systems. My students and I could go through them fluidly, knowing, ultimately, where the path would lead. Even the complex thinkers, the monumental ones, could be reduced within a clear structure so that students could have a distinct idea of their literary style and major theories. For authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, a larger project was necessary at the beginning for mastering the lexicon of key concepts, but then it was only a matter of following a clear path, paralleling my teaching and students' learning. However, when it came time to approach the fifteenth and sixteenth century, both the students and I had to leave the quiet streaming waters to face the most perilous and exciting falls called Renaissance. For the very same reason, since my graduation I have chosen to work on the Renaissance era and I hope I have been able to contribute to recovering one of the most fascinating periods of Western culture.

For my first doctoral research, at the University of Rome, I studied the medical works of Marsilio Ficino to demonstrate how fruitful a study of the most Platonic author of the fifteenth century could be from the perspective of history of medicine and natural philosophy. Throughout my four-year research in the Department of German and Romance Languages and Literatures at Johns Hopkins University I have wanted to prove how the Aristotelian Sperone Speroni, writing in the age of Reformation and Counter-

Reformation and considered an inoffensive author, could be the spring for the rebirth of one of the most ‘heretical’ movements of antiquity, sophistry. Both my doctoral projects have benefited from a strong interdisciplinary approach and have been situated at the intersection of different fields: history of philosophy and history of medicine in the first case, Italian literature and history of philosophy in the second.

To avoid any misunderstanding from ambiguous meaning of the term “sophistry,” I would like to clarify that this word does not have a derogatory connotation in this dissertation. Unlike the ordinary meaning in non-academic discussions, which refer to “sophistry,” “sophistic art,” “sophism,” “sophist” mostly in order to blame something or someone, in this dissertation these expressions will be always used within the specific meaning that they have in the field. The same type of misunderstanding might affect the word “appearance” in the title of this dissertation (*A World of Appearances*), although reading this study on the sophistic Renaissance will reveal how much the term “appearance” actually enables connecting philosophy, rhetoric, poetry, and painting in the unique cultural environment that was the Italian Renaissance.

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Many friends have had an essential role in my life in the US. Special thanks go to Miryam Yardumian, and Anthony and Maryann Villa, who have warmly welcomed my family as a part of their own.

I dedicate this work to my wife Monica and my son Giulio, with whom I have shared all the difficulties and exciting moments of our American life.

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Introduction

Sperone Speroni degli Alvarotti (Padua 1500–1588) was Pietro Pomponazzi's (1462–1525) pupil at the University of Bologna where he was educated as an Aristotelian. He was one of the main members of the “Accademia degli Infiammati” (“Academy of the Burning Ones”) in Padua and “Accademia delle notti vaticane” (“Academy of the Vatican Nights”) in Rome. He taught logic and philosophy at the University of Padua. His extraordinary rhetorical ability and performances were well known in the Italian political and cultural environment. Being an advocate of the use of Italian language for any and all disciplines, he was presented as one of the fathers of the vernacular in Bernardino Tomitano's (1517-1576) *Ragionamenti della lingua toscana* (1546). He was also in contact with the most important protagonists of the sixteenth century, including Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), Bernardo Tasso (1493-1569), Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542), Jacopo Mazzoni (1548-1598), Pope Pius IV (1499-1565), and the Duke of Urbino Guidobaldo II della Rovere (1514-1574), among others.¹

Sperone Speroni is mostly famous for his central role in the quarrel about language (“questione della lingua”) addressed in his *Dialogo delle lingue* (1542). His defense of the vernacular as a valuable language for literature and philosophy resulted in his choosing to write all his works in Italian. At the same time, Speroni proposed a revolution in philosophy promoting ancient sophists' perspectives and arguments as the most appropriate for political and civil life.

¹ An introduction to Speroni's biography and work is provided by M. Pozzi, “Nota introduttiva.” *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. Ed. M. Pozzi. Tome II. Milano: Ricciardi, 1996. 471-509. The book *Sperone Speroni* (Padova: Editoriale Programma, 1989) collects essays on several aspects of Speroni's production and above all provides two highly important tools for any scholarly research: a bibliography of Speroni's published works and a catalogue of Speroni's manuscripts collected in the Biblioteca Capitolare of Padua.

There is evidence that sophistry is constantly addressed and practiced in Speroni's *oeuvre*, from his dialogues through his *trattatelli* to the *Apologia dei dialoghi*. Within these works, Speroni carries on a defense of ancient sophistry against its accusers, primarily Socrates (469-399 BCE) and Plato (c. 429-347 BCE).

According to Speroni, sophistic rhetoric should regain the significance it possessed before Socrates and Plato destroyed it and fundamentally changed the history of Western culture. Speroni argued that the sophistic approach to the human world is more appropriate than any metaphysics. In fact, the sophists' relativism and flexibility in politics and ethics fit political and civil life better than Plato's eternal essences. Implying that ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy share a similar political and ethical situation, Speroni advocated for a rebirth of sophistic rhetoric as the best way to enhance the public life of each particular community.

Given the specific situation of Renaissance Italy, it being fragmented in a variety of regional cultures, a study of the relationship between Speroni's thinking and the tradition of ancient sophists, which is at the core of this dissertation, may also significantly impact the understanding of the Italian Renaissance. Despite the fact that Speroni's works deeply influenced early-modern culture even beyond Italy, from Bernardino Tomitano to Joachim du Bellay (c. 1522-1560), his *oeuvre* and legacy have been mostly neglected. Therefore, the study of this subject carries the urgency of reconstructing an important part of Italian and European cultural heritage beyond specific disciplinary boundaries.

All of Speroni's manuscripts are collected in 17 volumes in the Biblioteca Capitolare of Padua. A description of them was first provided by Claudio Bellinati's

*Catalogo dei manoscritti di Sperone Speroni nella Biblioteca Capitolare di Padova.*² A second and more detailed description is now available in Silvio Bernardinello's *Catalogo dei codici della Biblioteca Capitolare di Padova.*³ Speroni's works have been published several times from 1542 through the twentieth century. A full description of all editions is available in Mariella Magliani's *Bibliografia delle opere a stampa di Sperone Speroni.*⁴ In 1740, Natale dalle Laste and Marco Forcellini published the only complete edition of Speroni's works.⁵ Their edition is based on both manuscripts and previous editions. Scholars of Speroni can find just a few of these works in critical editions. Mario Pozzi published a critical edition of the following works: *Dialogo d'amore*, *Dialogo delle lingue*, *Dialogo della retorica* (book I), *Dialogo della istoria* (part II), *Della dignita' delle donne*, *Apologia dei dialoghi* (part I), and some letters.⁶

There are modern translations of only a few of Speroni's works. A French translation of the *Dialogo delle lingue* is available in a bilingual edition, as well as the *Dialogo d'amore.*⁷ The *Dialogo delle lingue* was also published with a parallel German translation.⁸ No English translation is available for any of Speroni's works.

Several contributions have been published in Italy in recent decades. Among the most significant are the studies on Speroni and the "Accademia degli Infiammati," on rhetoric

² C. Bellinati. "Catalogo dei manoscritti di Sperone Speroni nella Biblioteca Capitolare di Padova." *Sperone Speroni*. 323-356.

³ S. Bernardinello. *Catalogo dei codici della Biblioteca Capitolare di Padova. In appendice gli incunaboli con aggiunte manoscritte*. 2 vols. Padova: Istituto per la storia ecclesiastica padovana, 2007.

⁴ M. Magliani. "Bibliografia delle opere a stampa di Sperone Speroni." *Sperone Speroni*. 275-322.

⁵ S. Speroni. *Opere [...] tratte da' mss. Originali*. Eds. N. dalle Laste and M. Forcellini. 5 tomes. Venezia: Appresso D. Occhi, 1740 (reprint: ed. M. Pozzi. Roma: Vecchiarelli, 1989).

⁶ Pozzi, ed. *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. 471-849.

⁷ S. Speroni. *Dialogue des langues*. Eds. G. Genot, P. Larivaille and M. Pozzi. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001. Id. *Dialogue traittant d'amour & jalousie*. Eds. C. Gruget, P. Martin and J.-L. Fournel. Poitiers: La Licorne, 1998.

⁸ S. Speroni. *Dialogo delle lingue* [reprint from Speroni. *Opere*. I. Venezia, 1740]. With a German trans. Ed. H. Harth. München: W. Fink, 1975.

and politics in Speroni's *oeuvre*, and the important essays collected in the volume *Sperone Speroni*.⁹

French scholars have focused primarily on Speroni's *Dialogo delle lingue* and have demonstrated that this work was an important source for Joachim du Bellay's *Défense et illustration de la langue française*, while Jean-Louis Fournel has written the only monographic study on Speroni available throughout all international scholarship.¹⁰

In North America, Speroni is known mostly for his theory of the dialogue. In almost every work dedicated to that topic Speroni is present as an important voice of the Renaissance debate. More specifically, Jon Snyder offered an interpretation of Speroni's enigmatic writing as a strategy of defense against the Catholic Inquisition's charges. Virginia Cox wrote about the significance of Speroni's theory and practice of the "open" form of dialogue and its place in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture. Olga Zorzi Pugliese worked particularly on the connection between Speroni's theory and the idea of the "ludico" with an intriguing reference to Giorgio Colli's studies on the labyrinth as a powerful symbol in ancient Greek culture.¹¹

⁹ Among the most important Italian contributions, see F. Bruni. "S. Speroni e l'accademia degli Infiammati." *Filologia e letteratura* 13 (1967): 24-71; C. Vasoli. "Sperone Speroni: la filosofia e la lingua. L'ombra del Pomponazzi e un programma di 'volgarizzamento' del sapere." *Il volgare come lingua di cultura dal Trecento al Cinquecento*. Atti del Convegno internazionale (Mantova, 18-20 ottobre 2001). Eds. A. Calzola et al. Mantova: Olschki, 2003. 339-360; and the essays collected in the volume *Sperone Speroni*.

¹⁰ The first important study on the subject is P. Villey. *Les sources italiennes de la Défense et illustration de la langue française de Joachim du Bellay*. Paris: Champion, 1908. J.-F. Fournel, *Les dialogues de S. Speroni: liberté de la parole et règles de l'écriture*. Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1990.

¹¹ J. R. Snyder. *Writing the Scene of Speaking. Theories of Dialogue in the Late Italian Renaissance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989; V. Cox. *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992; O. Zorzi Pugliese. "Il concetto ludico del dialogo: Problema testuale nell'Apologia dei dialoghi di Sperone Speroni." *Il veltro: Rivista della civiltà italiana* 40 (1996): 340-344.. See also G. Colli, *La nascita della filosofia*, Adelphi, Milano 1975.

Despite the relevance of ancient sophists in understanding Speroni's *oeuvre*, Mario Pozzi and Raffaele Girardi are the only two scholars who have addressed the subject, and no comprehensive study has yet been provided.¹² On the one hand, Jean-Louis Fournel's book provides only a brief account, although it has merit in pointing out the issue; on the other hand, Eric MacPhail in his *The Sophistic Renaissance* does not intend to treat the Italian Cinquecento, although it should be said that his book is the only monograph on the rebirth of sophistry in early modern European culture.¹³ Furthermore, no exploration has been conducted on the Renaissance rebirth of skepticism as a vehicle for the diffusion of ancient sophistry in the works and *milieu* of Speroni, although scholars, such as Edward Muir, have established that during the Counter-Reformation period a new form of skepticism arose in the Venetian area.¹⁴ Considering that Speroni was educated and wrote his works in the vibrant atmosphere of intellectual life in Bologna, Padua and Venice, where Aristotelianism and skepticism often overlapped, it is likely that skepticism had a role in Speroni's rehabilitation of sophistry.

Scholars in Italian studies have addressed the Renaissance debate about the relationship between sophistry and other arts, but their contributions still lack an appropriate contextualization within a broader overview.¹⁵ In general, scholars coming from the fields of philosophy and literature have missed the opportunity to collaborate.

¹² M. Pozzi. "Speroni e il genere epidittico." *Sperone Speroni*. 55-88; R. Girardi. "Ercole e il Granchio: figure della 'sofistica speroniana'." *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 167 (1990): 396-411.

¹³ E. MacPhail, *The Sophistic Renaissance*, Genève: Droz, 2011. See in particular Marsilio Ficino's interpretation of Plato's anti-sophistic works, Pietro Bembo's translation of Gorgias, Aldus Manutius' editions and other significant events (pp. 37-52).

¹⁴ E. Muir. *The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance. Skeptics, Libertines, and Opera*. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2007. On early modern skepticism in Europe, see R. H. Popkin. *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle*. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁵ Evidence of this is the absence of Speroni in C. Scarpati. "Iacopo Mazzoni tra Tasso e Marino." *Aevum* 59 (1985): 433-458; and E. Russo. "Il rifiuto della sofistica nelle postille tassiane a Jacopo Mazzoni." *La*

The overall objective of this project is to fill the gap in international scholarship through a study of the rebirth of ancient sophists in Speroni's *oeuvre* and the debate over sophistry in his *milieu* among philosophers and writers.

The first chapter aims at presenting a survey of the fifteenth-century authors who first translated and commented on ancient sophistic works. Attention is paid to Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370-1444), Lorenzo Valla (c. 1406-1457), Teodoro Gaza (c. 1400-1475), and George of Trebizond (1395-1484), whose works are related especially to Gorgias of Leontini (c. 483-c. 376 BCE) and Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490-c. 420 BCE). The last part of the chapter focuses on Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) as the major interpreter of Plato's dialogues against sophists.

The second chapter examines how Speroni employs ancient Greek sophists to reverse a dominant Platonic perspective and rehabilitate sophistic rhetoric as a central activity in public and civic life. Particular attention is given to Speroni's arguments against Plato's metaphysics and political thought. To demonstrate my thesis, I provide an analysis of the following works of Speroni: the *Apologia dei dialoghi*, the *trattatelli* entitled *In difesa dei sofisti* and *Contra Socrate*, and the *Dialogo della retorica*.

The third chapter explores the variety of sophistic argumentations that Speroni applies in several works. Two principal categories of texts will be examined: the double arguments, or antilogies, such as the two letters condemning and praising sobriety addressed to Luigi (Alvise) Cornaro (1484-1566), and the so-called paradoxical dialogues *Dialogo dell'Usura* and *Dialogo della Discordia*, in which style as well as content are related to the author's interest in ancient rhetoric.

The fourth chapter focuses on the debate over sophistry and its relationship with metaphysics, politics, rhetoric, poetry, and the pictorial arts that took place in the second half of the sixteenth century in Italy and involved many central figures of the time, such as Torquato Tasso, Jacopo Mazzoni, and Gregorio Comanini (1550-1608). The chapter also engages the Renaissance debate on the value of Dante Alighieri's poetry and explores the role it played in the rebirth of sophistry.

In the conclusion of this dissertation, I summarize the results of my work and outline the paths of research that seem to be the most fruitful for future projects. I foresee potential innovations in the exploration of Speroni's legacy in the Italian and European sophistic Renaissance from the sixteenth century to today. As examples for possible subjects for broadening this research, I briefly address Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1576), Michel de Montaigne's (1533-1592) *Essays*, the Italian Baroque, the debate on sophistry in early modern and modern Spain, the nineteenth-century German philosophy, and "living thought" in present-day Italy.

Considering the limited number of scholarly studies directly related to the subject of my research, I have based my investigation mostly on primary sources. Some of them are available in modern editions and English translation; others are accessible only in the original languages, in early modern editions or manuscripts. The main primary source for the study of Speroni's works remains the five-volume edition of 1740, which is a consistent reference in my dissertation. For the first chapter of the dissertation, I benefit from the modern editions and translations of the fifteenth-century Latin works. The survey of the first chapter has served as a necessary starting point not only in featuring the rebirth of sophistic texts in the

Latin literature of the Quattrocento but also in providing a clear idea of the sources available for Speroni and his contemporaries.

The role that this project may play in the broader scholarship on the Renaissance has held my consistent attention. On the one hand, I have contextualized the subject of my research in a broader history of literature and philosophy with the main purpose of stressing the originality of the debate that involved some of the protagonists of sixteenth-century culture. On the other hand, I have avoided treating topics already sufficiently explored by international scholarship and I have referred to appropriate studies for the subjects connected to my research but not directly involved in it.

Ancient sophists' approaches to practical and theoretical issues have been broadly demonized from Plato's condemnation until their re-evaluation by modern German philosophers, such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 –1831) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Despite the fact that fine scholars in ancient studies, and especially Jacqueline De Romilly, have addressed the originality of the sophistic movement, the stigmatization inspired by Plato still tends to restrain scholarly endeavors to explore this important part of the Western philosophical heritage.¹⁶ Because of its fervid activity in promoting ancient authors, the Renaissance was not only the age of the rebirth of Plato and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) but also of other significant, although uncomfortable, traditions, among which sophistry had a primary role. So far, no scholar has treated the rebirth of sophists in Italy, where the Renaissance began, with the interdisciplinary approach and extended study that this subject deserves.

¹⁶ J. De Romilly. *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*. Tr. J. Lloyd. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

The fact that the Aristotelian Speroni dedicated so much of his intellectual production in the vernacular to the rebirth of sophistic arts makes his attempt a unique case in these respects within the span of roughly twenty-three centuries. Because of its innovative findings, I believe that this project may shed new light on the Italian Renaissance and lead scholars to reconsider the unique role of Speroni in the history of the European literature and philosophy.

Chapter I

Fifteenth-century perspectives on ancient sophists

Nul auteur ne rend si fortement les sentiments d'autrui
à moins que son propre coeur ne batte à l'unisson

A.-J. Festugière. *Contemplation et vie contemplative
selon Platon*. Paris: Vrin, 1978. 387

1. *Introduction*

Twentieth-century scholarship on fifteenth-century culture recovered authors and texts that had received no previous attention. Although from different perspectives and with different methodology, two scholars, Paul Oskar Kristeller and Eugenio Garin, played major roles in exploring the literary and philosophical production of the fifteenth century. They addressed primary sources through an extended exploration of ancient editions and manuscripts that no other scholar had taken into account. Through decades of work, roughly from the 1930s to the 1990s, they made available some of the most precious treasures of the first Renaissance. The volumes of the *Iter italicus* and the *Supplementum Ficinianum* by Kristeller as well as *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento* and *La cultura filosofica del rinascimento italiano* by Garin have continued to be essential references for international scholarship. Their titanic endeavor was particularly aimed at uncovering the

rebirth of the ancient classics in the Renaissance, addressing both the translation and variety of interpretations provided by the humanists of the fifteenth century.¹⁷ Platonism and Aristotelianism were, of course, the two major philosophical traditions engaged in the research of Kristeller and Garin. Those two traditions were important not only in and of themselves but also as vehicles for other authors and perspectives. In fact, thanks to Plato and Aristotle, it was possible to access the pre-Socratic thinkers, even those with whom Plato and Aristotle intended to impose their philosophical point of view. This is particularly true for ancient sophists.

Nowadays, scholars who study sophistry and its legacy can rely on several tools for exploring authors and texts in the field. From the volumes of *The Fragmente die Vorsokratiker* of Hermann Alexander Dies and Walther Kranz to Mario Untersteiner's *I sofisti*, in the last century scholars have had direct access to the sources as well as to valuable attempts in providing an interpretation of sophists' works. That knowledge was impossible for any early modern author. But thanks to humanists' Latin translation and interpretation of Aristotle and Plato, the level of knowledge about the sophistic tradition tremendously increased and reached a level that the Middle Ages had never achieved.

This chapter presents an overview of the main strains of fifteenth-century literary production related to sophistry. In providing a survey with punctual references to the most significant texts, the chapter prepares the ground for the study of Sperone Speroni's works and debate over sophistry among the sixteenth-century authors.

¹⁷ For the relevance of Garin and Kristeller in the twentieth century and essential bibliographical references, see Ch. Celenza. *The Lost Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 2004 (chapter 2).

This first part of the dissertation examines the presence of Gorgias of Leontini and Protagoras of Abdera in the Latin works of Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, George of Trebizond, Teodoro Gaza, and Marsilio Ficino. Thanks to their translations and interpretations, the sophistic Renaissance of the sixteenth century became possible, although Speroni's defense of sophists and the debate that followed had original and innovative aspects.

Fifteenth-century authors present different interpretations of ancient sophistry. In searching for a main distinction, one finds two different approaches. Some humanists argued for the validity of sophistry as a valuable approach to opposing metaphysical philosophy; others adopted Plato's point of view, rejecting all types of sophistic approaches. George of Trebizond is the most fitting example of the former, whereas Marsilio Ficino led the Platonists.

Ficino's case is particularly interesting for the paradox of its results. In fact, even though Ficino's commentaries on Plato's dialogues are clearly against sophistry, his expansive work in translating and interpreting Plato played a major role in the re-emergence of ancient sophists in the early modern age. The paradox is evident when one considers that Speroni's rehabilitation of sophistic rhetoric would not have been possible without Ficino's *oeuvre*, as Plato had been one of the major sources for knowledge of the ancient sophists, and Ficino made all of Plato's dialogues available in Latin.

Gorgias of Leontini and Protagoras of Abdera are the most popular sophists since antiquity. Plato titled two of his major dialogues after them, and Protagoras' relativism is the main subject of his *Theaetetus*; Aristotle praised Gorgias' prose in his *Rhetoric* while also arguing with sophistic arguments in his *Organon*; and Sextus Empiricus (160-210)

used the arguments of Gorgias and Protagoras to support the skeptical position. Given their relevance, this study of the Italian sophistic Renaissance must begin with the two greatest sophists of antiquity.

2. *Gorgias Redivivus*

“Is it possible to [...] claim that the key tenets of Humanist rhetoric are analogous to those of Gorgias?”¹⁸ This question posed by Nancy Struever’s study more than thirty years ago might be applied to other ancient sophists, Protagoras among them. Nevertheless, the answer to this question is still uncertain because of the gap in international studies with regard to the sophistic legacy in the early modern age. A solid contribution to finding a satisfactory answer may be given by focusing on primary sources, but such research must aim to examine what humanists actually read, translated, and commented upon. This type of investigation can help to clarify humanists’ familiarity with sophistic sources and, therefore, the possible analogy between fifteenth-century rhetoric and ancient sophistry.

In spite of Plato’s intention, his *Gorgias* certainly presents persuasive arguments in favor of rhetoric, a realization that fascinated not only pre-modern authors but also the German philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who appreciated the anti-Platonic arguments presented by the sophist Gorgias and his pupil Callicles in Plato’s

¹⁸ N. Struever, *The language of History in the Renaissance. Rhetoric and Historical Consciousness in Florentine Humanism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970. 46. Struever significantly dedicated the whole first chapter (“The Background of Humanist Historical language: The Quarrel of Philosophy and Rhetoric”) to the connection between Gorgian epistemology and its conception of language and the Humanistic debate on history, politics, and rhetoric.

dialogue. The paradoxical aspect of Platonism was well outlined by the classical scholar Eric Robertson Dodds: “it is a strange irony of history that Plato’s exposition of the ideas he meant to destroy should thus have contributed to the formidable renaissance of those ideas in our days.”¹⁹

One of the most striking defenses of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* is Callicles’ *rhetoric* (*Gorgias* 482c-486d), a speech made against Socrates, which crushed the Platonic supremacy of philosophy over rhetoric. Scholars have not found any evidence of the existence of such a sophist, and we do not know whether Callicles is a fictitious name for another sophist or a character that Plato invented. In either case, as Dodds points out, “one is tempted to believe that Callicles stands for something which Plato had it in him to become (and would perhaps have become, but for Socrates).”²⁰ If Plato created Callicles’ *rhetoric* – perhaps disclosing the dark side of his soul – he proved himself able to perform an explosive sophistic speech. If he just copied the speech from an original source, we owe him the knowledge of an important piece of sophistic rhetoric. In either case, Plato provided a most powerful weapon against his own philosophy.

According to the speech that Callicles performs in the *Gorgias*, philosophy cannot aspire to any supremacy in the Greek *paideia* because it cannot replace the function of rhetoric. Furthermore, Callicles argues that laws are merely conventions made up by weak people to preserve their power. Moreover, Callicles attacks Socrates’ method of argumentation, pointing out its contradictions.

¹⁹ E. R. Dodds. “Appendix.” Plato. *Gorgias. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*. Ed. E. R. Dodds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959. 390.

²⁰ E. R. Dodds. “Introduction.” Plato. *Gorgias*. 14.

In this first part of the chapter, I intend to mention some examples of the *Gorgias*'s legacy, particularly the part on Callicles' speech, in the fifteenth century, in order to prepare an understanding of Speroni's use of it to defend sophistic rhetoric from its detractors.

The humanist Leonardo Bruni translated Plato's *Gorgias* in Latin in 1409. Before this translation, Western readers had known the dialogue from secondary sources. This is evidence of a strong interest in rhetoric as well as Platonism since the beginning of the fifteenth century in Italy. Bruni's work also initiated the recovery of ancient sophistry in the pre-modern Western world. For the first time, Latin readers could appreciate the agonistic competition between the most popular sophistic rhetorician and Plato/Socrates, indicative of the ancient *agon* between metaphysical philosophy and rhetorical tradition. Thanks to the detailed study and edition of Bruni's translation by Matteo Venier, scholars have the opportunity to appreciate Bruni's interpretation of the *Gorgias*, which is the most important Platonic work against sophistic rhetoric.²¹ Furthermore, Bruni shared his interest with other Humanists. In his letter addressed to Niccolò Niccoli (1364-1437) in 1409, Bruni urged Niccoli to copy the translation of Plato's *Gorgias* that he had sent to him so that he could have it back as soon as possible.²²

Bruni's translation, introduced by a dedicatory letter to pope Giovanni XXIII and an *argumentum*, is also interesting because of Bruni's contradictory attitude towards the matter. On the one hand, Bruni admired Plato's attack against rhetoric; on the other hand, he highly esteemed the rhetorical art.²³ Bruni's was not an isolated approach. Other

²¹ M. Venier, ed. *Platonis Gorgias Leonardo Aretino interprete*. Firenze: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011.

²² Venier, ed. *Platonis Gorgias Leonardo Aretino interprete*. 12-13.

²³ For the letter and *argumentum*, see Ibid. 239-241. About this contradiction see J. Hankins, *Plato in the*

authors related to Platonism were embarrassed by Plato's rejection of rhetoric and responded in different ways. The most relevant example, which will be deepened in the last part of the chapter, is Marsilio Ficino who argued that Plato intended to condemn only sophistic rhetoric, as he considered it a detrimental practice.

According to Hankins, Bruni was led to the *Gorgias* by Cicero's (106-43 BCE) *De oratore*, which supports the model of an orator involved in civic life and opposes Plato's banishment of rhetoric from the ideal city. Hankins suggested that this very opposition drew Bruni's attention to Plato's *Gorgias*: "the possibility of a conflict in cultural values between two heroes of the humanist movement would surely have roused Bruni's interest in translating the dialogue."²⁴ In either case, Bruni tends to soften the conflict that is going on in the *Gorgias*, although he shows a clear awareness of the intensity of the dialectical strife between Plato/Socrates and Gorgias/Callicles. Moreover, Bruni's notes, next to several of Gorgias' pronouncements, prove his appreciation for the sophists and some of their arguments.²⁵

Unlike Bruni, the byzantine Teodoro Gaza is explicitly engaged in defending rhetoric from Plato's attack, as shown by John Monfasani. Teodoro came to Italy in 1440 and taught in Ferrara from 1446 to 1449, when he gave two courses on Demosthenes' (384-322 BCE) speech *On the Crown* and Plato's *Gorgias*. His students produced the *reportata*, or lecture notes, which report the main topics of the courses. Remarkably, Teodoro did not use Leonardo Bruni's translation of the *Gorgias*; he rather paraphrased or translated most of the text. Apparently, he intended to give a different interpretation of

Italian Renaissance. 2 vols. Leiden, New York, Kobenhavn and Köln: Brill, 1990. I. 57-58 and *passim*. And Venier, ed. *Platonis Gorgias Leonardo Aretino interprete*. 22-23.

²⁴ Hankins. *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*. I. 53.

²⁵ Ibid. 56-57. For further details on Bruni's translation of *Gorgias*, see Ibid. 394-396.

Plato's work. Teodoro reads the text from an Aristotelian perspective, which endorses rhetoric and brings him to criticize Plato's approach. In fact, Teodoro attacks Plato and argues that his rejection of rhetoric stems from the traditional antagonism between rhetoricians and philosophers. Moreover, Teodoro claims that Plato, in attacking his enemies, proves to be an excellent rhetorician. Furthermore, he notices contradictions in Plato's argumentation and proposes solving them with philosophical tools provided in Aristotle's works.²⁶

Teodoro Gaza's activity in supporting rhetoric, even the sophistic type, is also related to his collaboration with Giovanni Andrea Bussi (1417-1475) in translating and publishing the *editio princeps* of Aulus Gellius' (130-180 CE) *Noctes Atticae* in 1469. Indeed, Aulus Gellius inserts into his work (*Noctes Atticae* X, 22) Callicles' *rhesis* presented by Plato in his *Gorgias* (482c-486d). This speech was either not usually translated or absent in the manuscripts of Aulus Gellio's work, but Bussi decides to translate it for the *editio princeps* and, in the dedicatory letter "ad Paulum II Venetum pontificem maximum," recognizes the significant collaboration of Teodoro Gaza in translating the Greek part of Aulus Gellius's work.²⁷

Another byzantine who supported the argument for rhetoric in the *Gorgias* is George of Trebizond, as Monfasani shows in his study.²⁸ His most important work on the recovery of the ancient sophistical rhetoric is the *Oratio de laudibus eloquentie*,

²⁶ For a complete analysis of Teodoro Gaza's commentaries on Demosthenes' and Plato's works see J. Monfasani. "L'insegnamento di Teodoro Gaza a Ferrara." [1988] Id. *Greeks and Latins in Renaissance Italy. Studies on Humanism and Philosophy in the 15th Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. 8-11. Monfasani is editing a critical edition of the texts from the courses.

²⁷ A complete analysis of the translation and publication of the *rhesis* in Aulus Gellius's work is provided by Venier, ed. *Platonis Gorgias Leonardo Aretino interprete*. 374-379.

²⁸ J. Monfasani. *George of Trebizond: A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976. 255-261.

presented in Venice in the early 1430s, which is similar to the preface of his *Rhetoricorum libri quinque*.²⁹ George chooses to defend rhetoric by reproducing Gorgias's defense in Plato's *Gorgias* (456c-457c). In fact, George claims that rhetoric should not be cast out of the cities because of evil orators.³⁰ In other words, we should not confuse the art with those who use it incorrectly. Indeed, the guilty rhetoricians, and not rhetoric, should be banished.³¹ According to Monfasani's study, George adjusted Aristotle's arguments to support the sophistic perspective and "justified the sophists' claim to teach a 'political science,' while at the same time trying to preserve Aristotle's authority for rhetoric."³² Moreover, "he found in the Sophists criticized by Plato and Aristotle not merely inspiration but also the basic themes of this endeavor."³³

Another case of a humanist becoming attracted to the sophistic arguments in the *Gorgias* is Lorenzo Valla. He recalls the dialogue in his marginal notes on Quintilianus' (c. 35-100 CE) *Institutio oratoria* and in his *De vero falsoque bono*. Valla's appreciation for the sophistic rhetoric criticized by Plato was more than pure philological interest. According to Venier, Valla was inspired by Callicles' *rhexis* and found in it the most efficacious argument to support the opinion of the Epicurean character in his *De vero falsoque bono*.³⁴ Remarkably, the Epicurean's perspective is presented as a Pagan version of the Christian point of view, so that the use of Callicles' speech ultimately results in an argument for the defense of virtue. It should be noted that Valla does not explicitly

²⁹ The edition of the text is published in Monfasani. *George of Trebizond*. 365-369 ("Appendix XI").

³⁰ Ibid. 258.

³¹ Speroni uses the same argument in his work, as we will see. A further similarity with Speroni's arguments is presented in Monfasani. *George of Trebizond*. 331-333.

³² Ibid. 260.

³³ Ibid. 261. On George of Trebizond against Plato, see also Hankins. *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*. I. 168-170.

³⁴ Venier, ed. *Platonis Gorgias Leonardo Aretino interprete*. 45-48.

endorse Callicles and his sophistic speech but rather extracts from it what he needs for his purpose. Nevertheless, in doing so, Valla recognizes the value of sophistic rhetoric.

Considering the approach of Leonardo Bruni, Teodoro Gaza, George of Trebizond, and Lorenzo Valla, one may certainly agree with Venier's conclusions: Plato's *Gorgias* influenced humanists' works more for the sophistic rhetoric that it displayed than for the philosophy of Socrates and Plato.³⁵

3. *Protagoras and humanist literature*

In the proem of the third book of his *Dialecticae disputationes*, Lorenzo Valla mentions the “traps and tricks of the sophists who [...] have fabricated certain new terms for the ruination of their opponents, with no less malice or even more, perhaps, than those who dip their arrows in venom when they go into battle.”³⁶ This comparison to battle, certainly appropriate for describing the ancient rhetorical *agon*, suggests the image of a harsh struggle that, according to Valla, should be avoided since it opposes the correct method of discussion. Valla, therefore, proposes an alternative image that suggests how interlocutors should correctly conceive of themselves when debating: “when two of us dispute with one another, we are not really enemies, as those people are when they fight;

³⁵ Ibid. 48: “Nella prima parte del Quattrocento, il *Gorgia* sembra avere dunque esercitato un’influenza originale sul pensiero storico e filosofico di alcuni umanisti; ma ciò piuttosto per il tramite delle tesi che vi sono esposte per bocca di Callicle, l’antagonista di Socrate – tesi dunque antitetichie a quelle propugnate da Platone –, anziché per il tramite delle tesi promosse da Socrate, e, in ultima analisi, da Platone stesso.”

³⁶ L. Valla. *Dialectical Disputations*. Eds. B. P. Copenhaver and L. Nauta. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012. I. 209.

both of us soldier under the same commander – the Truth.”³⁷ Proposing the model of dialogue presented by Plato/Socrates, where the interlocutors should actually be allies in reaching a common goal, Valla reduces the ancient *agon* to a peaceful opportunity for reaching a common level of understanding.

The practice of double and opposing speeches is based on an opposite idea of truth. According to Protagoras, whoever is looking for a firm conclusion at the end of a speech or debate will be disappointed in finding that one can argue for and against the same thesis at the same time. Since antiquity, Protagoras has been considered the founder of the practice of double speeches. Diogenes Laertius (c. 3rd century CE) claims that “he was the first to declare that there are two possible positions on every questions, opposed to each other; and indeed he was the first to present arguments along these lines” (*Life of the Philosophers* IX, 51).³⁸ According to Diogenes, *The Art of Controversy* and two books on *Opposing Arguments* are on the list of works that Protagoras would have written (*Life of the Philosophers* IX, 55).³⁹

Despite the fact that Plato and Aristotle had attempted to demonstrate the destructive results of Protagorean rhetoric, which challenges the fundamental law of noncontradiction, early modern authors were fascinated by it, not only for the rhetoric but also for its broader relativistic and anthropocentric view of the human world. The most popular of Protagoras’ claims, as reported by Sextus Empiricus (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 216), sounds like a humanist manifesto: “man is the measure of all things [...] and by measure he means the criterion of truth.” This is unquestionably a glorification of the

³⁷ Ibid. 209.

³⁸ J. Dillon and G. Tania, eds. *The Greek Sophists*. London: Penguin Books, 2003. 3.

³⁹ Ibid. 4.

power that the human being has for shaping his own world through the most fitting rules, without any metaphysical bond.

MacPhail argued that “the Sophistic Renaissance is, in its most important manifestations, a Protagorean Renaissance” and arguing both sides of an issue, which is the core of Protagoras’ method, becomes one of the most popular rhetorical models in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁴⁰ There are different works that have been considered in relation to the double-speech form, although their proximity to the Protagorean genre is controversial. I would like to mention some of them in preparation for chapter three, in which I explore how Speroni applies double-argument speech.

Eugenio Garin, Jerold Seigel and Francesco Bausi have suggested that Leonardo Bruni’s *Dialogi ad Petrum Histrum* are a rhetorical exercise of antilogical literature, practiced through a Ciceronian model and considered part of the humanist *paideia*.⁴¹ One may consider this to be one of the ways in which the culture of the Quattrocento emulated the ancient world with the intention of recreating conditions for a new Athens or Rome. According to Garin, Bruni’s dialogue first aims to practice oratory skills, instead of logical demonstrations, for application in ethical discussions.⁴² In his study, Bausi

⁴⁰ E. MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. Genève: Droz, 2011. 73. For a survey of ancient literature related to the Protagorean antilogic - including Plato, Cicero, and Diogenes Laertius - see MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. 73-79.

⁴¹ See J. Seigel. “‘Civic Humanism’ or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni.” *Past and Present* 34 (1966). 3-48; E. Garin. *L’età nuova. Ricerche di storia della cultura dal XII al XVI secolo*. Napoli: Morano, 1969. *passim*; Id. “La cultura fiorentina nella seconda metà del ’300 e i ‘barbari britannici’.” *La Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana* 64 (1960). 181-195; F. Bausi. “Nota sul procedimento antilogico nei *Dialoghi* di Leonardo Bruni.” *Interpres* 12 (1992). 275-283.

⁴² “Nei dialoghi del Bruni [...] il fulcro è una esercitazione retorica *sic et non*: un esempio vistoso di quella ‘dialettica’ che gli antichi opponevano ai ‘moderni’, disputa *pro e contro*, duplici discorsi, argomentazioni persuasive valide sul terreno ‘morale’, di fronte alle tecniche logiche della dimostrazione e confutazione condotte sul terreno rigorosamente ‘formale’.” (E. Garin, “La cultura fiorentina nella seconda metà del ’300 e i ‘barbari britannici’.” 192). A similar interpretation is presented by P. O. Kristeller. *La tradizione classica nel pensiero del Rinascimento*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1965. Sec. ed. 1987. 150-151. For an overview of the scholarly debate on Bruni’s *Dialogi* in the twentieth century, see S. U. Baldassarri. “Introduzione.” L. Bruni. *Dialogi ad Petrum paulum Histrum*. Ed. S. U. Baldassarri. Firenze: Olschky,

mentions other work that would be considered cases of antilogical literature of the fifteenth-century. For example, in Cristoforo Landino's (1424-1498) *Disputationes Camaldulenses* Lorenzo de' Medici praises the active life and Leon Battista Alberti defends the value of the contemplative life.

Nevertheless, the examples reported by Garin and Bausi risk extending the category of antilogic to the entire literary genre of the dialogue. Protagorean antilogic is not a sequence of opposite opinions expressed by different interlocutors, even when they do not achieve any final common conclusion, it is rather a much more radical practice that aims to affirm the truth of two opposite opinions at the same time. Moreover, and much more destabilizing, the author of this Protagorean practice does not intend to persuade of anything except the impossibility of choosing an opinion truer than the opposite. MacPhail pointed out that the fifteenth-century dialogues presented by Garin and Bausi as examples of antilogical literature are misleading; indeed, "in the sophistic *antilogia*, we cannot determine what the speaker really means, other than that he means to insinuate the truth of opposites."⁴³ Evidence of this fundamental difference between dialogue and sophistic *antilogia* is the fact that Plato and Aristotle, who considered Protagoras the worst enemy of ontology and logic, supported the dialogue as an extremely valuable means of practicing philosophy. Even the aporetic or Socratic dialogues of the first Plato, such as the *Laches*, and the dialectical form of dialogue proposed by Aristotle for discussing matters about which we cannot reach any absolute truth are completely different from any Protagorean double argument.

1994. 6-12.

⁴³ MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. 83.

Although one does not consider the Renaissance dialogue as an example of Protagorean *antilogia*, dialogue as a genre may be related to Plato's *Protagoras* in other respects. As Andrea Capras has demonstrated in his study of this dialogue, Plato presented a rhetorical performance on a virtual stage, probably following the same rules of the Greek *agon* as it was performed by the rhetoricians of ancient Greece. Thanks to the *Protagoras* and Plato's other dialogues, we can access one of the most important aspects of this classical culture, for the dispute between the two characters Protagoras and Socrates follows the rules for debating that interlocutors applied between fifth and fourth century BCE, a period of time when sophists were protagonists of the public scene in Greece. In other words, Plato did not invent the verbal conflict that takes place in his *Protagoras*, he rather portrayed, with a good degree of verisimilitude, what one could actually witness at that time.⁴⁴ One may see in the dialogues of Bruni and Landino the same type of verbal agonistic competition of Plato's *Protagoras*. By this similarity, some humanists reproduced one of the main features of this classical culture and found a way to honor their ancient models.

However, a direct influence of the *Protagoras*, as well as of Plato's other dialogues on sophistry (except for the *Gorgias*), on Renaissance culture was not possible before Marsilio Ficino's translations and commentaries. Given that Ficino had been considered for centuries as the principal source for understanding Plato's *oeuvre*, it is necessary to examine his interpretation of Plato's dialogues before investigating how the Protagorean rhetoric, and sophistry in general, affected sixteenth-century culture.

⁴⁴ A. Capras, *Agon Logon. Il Protagora di Platone tra eristica e commedia*, Milano: Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2001 (*passim*).

4. Marsilio Ficino's interpretation of sophists

With his translations and interpretations of Plato's works, Marsilio Ficino had a special role in the recovery of ancient sophistry in the Renaissance. Thanks to Ficino's translations and commentaries on Plato's dialogues, European scholars gained access to Platonic texts that had only been partially or indirectly known in the Middle Ages. He was also the author of original works in Latin and in the vernacular, the latter written with the aim of reaching a broad public, including the emerging middle class of Florentine traders, which was involved in politics and cultural life. His translations, commentaries and original works have influenced Western culture in a number of fields, including philosophy, philology, religious studies and psychology. Scholars are still exploring the impact of Ficino's oeuvre on the early modern and modern world. After receiving an Aristotelian education, Ficino was introduced to the milieu of Cosimo de' Medici who, at the beginning of the 1460s, asked Ficino to translate a Greek manuscript of Plato's *oeuvre*. Ficino's life coincided closely with the rebirth of Platonism and the associated ancient traditions. Ficino's complete translation of Plato's works was published in 1484, and the complete series of his commentaries in 1496. Ficino's interpretation of Platonism immediately became the main reference for all the European culture, and he played an influential role as the most authoritative interpreter of Plato until the nineteenth century.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See A. Carlini. "Marsilio Ficino e il testo di Platone." *Marsilio Ficino. Fonti, testi, fortuna*. Eds. S. Gentile and S. Toussaint. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2006. 25-64.

The rediscovery of the sophists' works by Marsilio Ficino is a sort of duplication of what ironically happened with Plato's dialogues. On the one hand, he is considered an *alter Plato* who revived the Platonic metaphysics conceived against sophists; on the other hand, he is the major author involved in the rebirth of sophistry because of his expansive translations and interpretations of Plato's texts, where sophists and their arguments are often protagonists.

In his commentaries, Ficino is certainly on Plato's side against Gorgias, Protagoras and the other terrible enemies of Socratic and Platonic philosophy, but at the same time he is forced to explain the sophistic perspective reported by Plato. In other words, Ficino experiences the impossibility of reviving Platonism without reviving sophistic rhetoric at the same time, so that the new diffusion of Plato's *oeuvre* through Europe beginning at the end of the fifteenth century brought a new awareness of the ancient sophists.

If it is true that Ficino's translation and interpretation of Plato had been considered as a main source by the European public, at least until the new philological enterprises in the nineteenth century, one should also consider that sophists had been read mostly from the Ficinian perspective. There were surely other sources, such as the skeptic's texts and ancient historiography, but it is certain that Ficino, thanks to his philological and philosophical authority, had a central place in the libraries of early modern authors.

This part of the chapter will examine Ficino's commentaries on Plato's dialogues about sophistry, particularly *The Sophist*, *Euthydemus*, *Theaetetus*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*. Ficino's commentary on *The Sophist* is the only one published in a critical

edition with an extended introduction by M.J.B. Allen.⁴⁶ For the others we can count on an English translation and no specific study.

Plato's *The Sophist* is conceived in order to demonstrate the real identity of the sophist as an imposter, a character diametrically opposed to the philosopher. The dialogue establishes a specific meaning of the term "sophist," which is defined as a completely negative figure and relegated to the rank of false wise man. In fact, in imitating the philosopher, the sophist simulates a knowledge that he does not have. Beyond this general definition, Plato desires to catch the specific nature of the sophist who typically hides himself and, in so doing, maintains his reputation in the city.

A comparison of the two kinds of image-making arts, proposed by one of the characters of the dialogue called the Stranger, serves in unmasking the sophist. Plato calls "icastic" the art that makes a likeness and "fantastic" the art that creates semblance. The first is practiced by the true painter or sculptor, who tries to reproduce faithfully the original, the second by the falsifying artist, who conveys the illusion of perfect proportions. Like the second type of painter, the sophist pretends to render the truth and dissimulates his true intention through a skillful manipulation of appearances. The sophist is not a naive imitator but rather a practitioner of a fantastic verbal art, someone who talks about what actually does not exist.

In an ingenious move, throughout his dialogue, Plato poses his champion, the philosopher, as a new cultural model – indeed, an eternal form – and the sophist as the anti-hero needing to be unmasked. Beyond analogous to the fantastic painter, the sophist is an ignorant and venal deceiver, a juggler of phantasms, greedy and ambitious, and far

⁴⁶ M. J. B. Allen, *Icastes: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's Sophist*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1989.

from being a teacher since his art is far from reproducing truth. Ficino's commentary follows and supports Plato's condemnation of the sophist as a false and twisted image of the philosopher: "Finally the sophist is ignorant. He is a feigner and manipulator of phantasms, and an avaricious and ambitious refuter".⁴⁷

The definition of the sophist and the features of his art mentioned above are not only important for an understanding of the approach of Plato and Ficino, which influenced Western culture for centuries, but also for preparing our exploration of the debate over sophistry and poetry as a fantastic art in chapter four, especially regarding the debate between Torquato Tasso and Jacopo Mazzoni.

Ficino's commentary on the *Euthydemus* presents a defense of those who contemplate the truth, the philosophers, against the sophists' attacks, which, in the beginning, deceive and then disappoint listeners. The commentary pays particular attention to the extremely dangerous type of eristic sophistry and to two of its representatives, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Ficino highlights how as the dialogue proceeds Plato gradually extends his critique to all kinds of sophistry, which become games or artifacts conceived in order to enmesh the audience. The best weapon against this sophistic practice is the clarification of terms and how specific words relate to each other: "Socrates says that the entire school of Sophists is a game of words, and that they utterly conceal the nature of things, and that their crafty barbs can be neutralised only by an exposition of words and by distinctions of meaning."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "Denique sophista est ignorans, phantasmatum fictor et praestigiator, avarus ambitiosusque redargutor" (Allen. *Icastes*. 277-278).

⁴⁸ A. Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy. Ficino on Plato*. Shephard-Walwyn: London, 2006. 76. "Tum Socrates universum sophistarum gymnasium ait, ludum esse verborum, eosque rerum naturam omnino latere, atque artificiosas illorum telas, sola verborum expositione significationisque distinctione posse dissolvere" (M. Ficino. *Opera Omnia*. Basileae: Ex officina Henricpetrina, 1576. 1301).

In summarizing Plato's dialogue, Ficino has the opportunity to focus on the relationship between sophistry and poetry, which is not actually stated by Plato in his *Euthydemus*: "note that the common abuse of the art of rhetoric, such as is practiced by the Sophists, is directly repudiated as a kind of wicked enchantment which always strives to infect men's minds with poisonous disturbances. For a similar reason he [i.e. Plato] denounces the abuse of poetry in other dialogues."⁴⁹ Generally speaking, Ficino's opinion on poetry is shifty; on the one hand, he agrees with Plato's *Republic* in condemning a particular kind of poetry for its effect on citizens; on the other hand, he appreciates a different kind of poetry and praises several ancient and modern poets.⁵⁰ In the specific case of the *Euthydemus*, Ficino considers poetry and sophistry alike because of their common effect on men's souls; indeed, verses as well as speeches bring listeners into a world of false opinions.

Ficino interprets the last part of the *Euthydemus* as an extension of Plato's condemnation to all of rhetorical art, for rhetoric in general keeps listeners away from metaphysics as well as moral and political philosophy:

Soon afterwards he moves down from the Sophist to the rhetorician, for they both make a false show of civic virtue, as we read in *Gorgias*; and the Sophist feigns the contemplative nature of the philosopher, while the rhetorician feigns the philosopher's moral training, both far from the truth. But Socrates shows that

⁴⁹ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 78. "Attende iterum comunem hic oratoriae artis abusum sophisticae similem prorsus vituperari, tanquam fascinationis maleficae speciem, ubique ad inficiendos perturbationibus animos venefice contendente. Simili quadam ratione communem poesis abusum alibi detestatur" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1302).

⁵⁰ The relationship between Ficino and Plato on the value of poetry is accurately analyzed by M. J. B. Allen. *Synoptic Art. Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation*. Olschki: Firenze, 1998. 93-123.

while rhetoricians and orators profess to be both philosophers and statesmen, they are completely useless in both capacities.⁵¹

The passage above is explicitly connected to the *Gorgias*, where Plato disqualifies rhetorical art as a mere practice of persuasion. But before expanding our analysis to Ficino's commentary on this dialogue, it is useful to analyze his commentaries on two other dialogues, the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, in which Plato displays the sophistic gnoseology, or theory of knowledge.

In his commentary on the *Theaetetus*, Ficino summarizes Protagoras' point of view as it is presented by Plato in the dialogue: individual experiences and perceptions are the basis of any type of knowledge, and man is the measure of all things; therefore, anything one perceives must be true, even when one's perceptions reveal opposite conclusions. Ficino considers imagination, the classical medium between senses and intellect, as a part of this process:

Then he [i.e. Plato] introduces the definition given by Protagoras, who says that knowledge is sense. Indeed, Protagoras considers man to be the measure of all things: of things that exist as 'are', and of things that do not exist as 'are not'; and however anything appears to anyone, that is how it is. For, he says, all things are as they are perceived through the senses; those which are perceived as imaginings

⁵¹ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 80. "Mox a sophista descendit ad rhetorem: uterque enim civilem virtutem falso profitetur, ut scribitur in Gorgia: et sophista quidem philosophi speculationem, rhetor autem moralem philosophi disciplinam simulat procul a vero. Ostendit autem rhetores atque oratores dum se, et philosophos, et civiles simul profitentur, esse ad utrunque prorsus inutiles" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1303).

are therefore perceived by an inner sense. Thus he would have it that knowledge is sense.⁵²

In Ficino, the faculty of imagination (*phantasia*) is often central in the process of knowledge creation as well as in the relationship between human beings and demons.⁵³ But no metaphysical or demonic dimension seems involved in the passage above. Rather, Ficino connects imagination to Protagoras' gnoseology, so that relativism is clearly related to man's ability to rework perceptions.

The remainder of the commentary summarizes the conflict between Socrates and Protagoras - who is not actually present as a character - in the manner set by Plato in his dialogue: an exposition and confutation of Protagoras' relativism. One can consider this conflict between Plato and Protagoras as an example of a broader war between two opposite cultural fronts: on the one side, Socratic and Platonic philosophy based on the Eleatic tradition of Parmenides (V c. BCE), Melissus of Samos (V c. BCE) and Zeno of Elea (c. 490–430 BCE); on the opposite side, Protagoras and other authors, including Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 560-420 BCE), Homer, and Empedocles (V c. BCE), who presented similar theories. Through the text, the reader may learn the main features of both traditions.

⁵² Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 35. "Affert post haec Protagorae definitionem, scientiam sensum esse dicentis. Hominem quippe Protagoras rerum omnium mensuram esse censet, existentium quidem ut sunt non existentium autem, ut non sunt, et quaelibet cuique talia esse, qualia cuique videntur. Quales enim res quaeque sunt, tales sentiri. Quales sentiuntur, tales phantasiae, id est, sensui interiori videri. Quo effici vult, ut sensus scientia sit" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1274).

⁵³ The connection between sophistry and imagination is extensively treated by M. J. B. Allen. *Icastes*. 117-204. On demonology and imagination in *The Sophist* see also T. Katinis. "Daemonica machinamenta tra Platone e l'Umanesimo: a partire da un passo del commento di Ficino al *Sofista*." *Arte e daimon*. Ed. D. Angelucci. Quodlibet: Macerata, 2003. 83-96; G. Giglioni. "Coping with Inner and Outer Demons: Marsilio Ficino's Theory of the Imagination." *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period*. Ed. Y. Haskell. Turnhout: Brepols, 2012. 19-50.

Unlike in the *Theaetetus*, in the *Protagoras* Socrates confronts Protagoras as an actual character of the dialogue. Ficino's commentary emphasizes Plato's/Socrates' ability in arguing against Protagoras but also shows the rhetorical art so skillfully performed by the sophist of Abdera. Additionally, Ficino connects Protagoras with the *theologi veteres*, the ancient philosophers-rulers-theologists whose thoughts would agree with the sophist's oration. In other words, Protagoras appears as an important part of ancient Greek culture and of broader human history under the guidance of divine Providence, as we will see further in this chapter.

At the very beginning of his commentary on the *Protagoras*, Ficino presents Aesclepius and Plato as brothers, both sons of Apollo, the former dedicated to healing the human body, the latter to healing human souls. That said, the worst disease of the soul is false opinion, and sophistry is the most dangerous vehicle for spreading the contagion.

Ficino considers both Socrates and Plato as emissaries of God:

There survives among the Greeks that absolutely true saying about Plato to the effect that Phoebus begot two sons in particular, Aesclepius and Plato: Aesclepius to heal bodies, and Plato to heal souls. All the followers of Socrates bear witness that Socrates, too, had been sent by God to purify men's souls.

Now disease of the soul is seen to consist in false opinions and bad ways of living. But there is no easier way of imparting such a great evil to innocent souls than by means of the Sophists.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 65. "Extat apud Graecos verissimum de Platone dictum, Phoebum videlicet duos praecipue filios genuisse, Aesculapium, et Platonem. Aesculapium quidem qui corporibus, Platonem vero qui animis mederetur. Socratem quoque Socratici omnes purgandorum gratia animorum a Deo missum fuisse testantur. Morbus autem animi in falsis opinionibus malisque moribus videtur

A similar argument can be found in Ficino's *De vita libri tres* (*Three Books of Life*), which was intended to be a medical-magical-philosophical treatise on how to heal both body and soul and keep them healthy. The *De vita* is one of the most original of Ficino's works and eventually became a bestseller and source for similar treatises written in the early modern era. In the preface of the first book of the *De vita*, Ficino presents Galenus, instead of Aesclepius, as a healer of bodies, while Plato is still kept as the healer of souls.⁵⁵ Clearly, Ficino exploits the metaphor of the true philosopher as a good physician as a rhetorical device for defeating the poisonous art of sophistry.

In his commentary to the *Protagoras*, Ficino presents Platonism as an antidote against ignorance and sophistry as the opposite of philosophy:

Philosophers, of course, are those who assiduously seek the truth from simple love of truth itself, while Sophists pursue opinion from love of opinion. For Sophists are like traders and dealers in learning: they indiscriminately assemble from all directions a variety of opinions which they can think about or talk about in any way they choose and which they later sell like merchandise to rich young men in exchange for wealth and vainglory.⁵⁶

consistere. Tantum vero malum ingenuis animis haud tam facile ab aliis, quam a sophistis solet inferri" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1296).

⁵⁵ M. Ficino. *Three Books of Life*. Eds. C. V. Kaske and J. R. Clark. Binghamton, NY: Renaissance Society of America, 1989. 102: "Ego sacerdos minimus patres habui duos: Ficinum medicum, Cosmum Medicum. Ex illo natus sum, ex isto renatus. Ille quidem me Galieno tum medico tum Platonico commendavit; hic autem divino consecravat me Platoni. Et hic similiter atque ille Marsilium medico destinavit: Galienus quidem corporum, Plato vero medicus animorum."

⁵⁶ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 65. "Profecto philosophi sunt qui veritatem studiose quaerunt, veritatis duntaxat ipsius amore. Sophistae vero opinionem affectant, similiter opinionis amore. Hi enim quasi disciplinarum mercatores et caupones, undique opiniones absque delectu varias congregant, tum ad excogitandum, tum ad dicendum utcunque libuerit pertinentes, quas deinde quasi venales divitibus

According to Ficino, sophists' influence on young men is similar to the songs of the sirens and the deadly draughts of Circe on Ulysses' men.⁵⁷ Illusion and deception remain the key terms for defining sophistic effects on citizens. Following the same path, the commentary then focuses on the confutation of Protagoras's opinion of virtue. The sophist argues that he is able to teach the virtue even if he cannot define it, or, in other words, he is able to convey to students what he does not know. From a Platonic point of view, Protagoras' argument is untenable, for there is no true teaching without knowledge of the eternal forms. In other words, only the knowledge of the metaphysical dimension, which is the only true being, can guarantee a truthful communication.

Protagoras' oration presented in Plato's dialogue (*Protagoras* 320C-328D) is one of the most popular speeches in classical literature. In his so-called "great discourse," Protagoras narrates a myth involving the two brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus as well as Zeus and Hermes in order to present the development of human civilization as dependent on the art of politics, a divine gift. Ficino appreciated Protagoras' speech, for it confirmed the tradition of the *theologi veteres* ("ancient wise men") that he presented in its *Theologia platonica* ("Platonic Theology"), published in 1482. According to Ficino, human history is a progression from darkness to the light brought by Christian Revelation. On this path, Pagan mythical figures, such as Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus, as well as Pagan authors, such as Plato (all considered *theologi veteres*),

vendant adolescentibus, divitiarum et inanis gloriae gratia. Itaque nihil unquam habent pensi, utrum vera vel bona an contra, aut ipsi discant, aut alios doceant, sed et confundunt, et passim errores effundunt quotidie plurimos, nulla prorsus rectae elationis habita ratione, modo et divitias cumulent, et vulgarem gloriam consequantur" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1296-1297).

⁵⁷ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 65. Ficino. *Opera*. 1297.

civilized mankind and prepared the coming of the true religion in the world.⁵⁸ It is possible that Ficino also found evidence of the proximity of Protagoras' speech to his theory in other sources. For example, he might have known the story transmitted by Lucius Flavius Philostratus' (c. 170-c. 247) *Lives of the Sophists* I.10 about the father of Protagoras, Maeandrius, who convinced the Persian king Xerxes to accept the young Protagoras as a student of the Persian *magoi* ("wise men").⁵⁹

In either case, Ficino's commentary on the dialogue shows a clear appreciation for Protagoras' words: "in his words Protagoras puts forward some mysteries of the ancients as being worthy of note. For although he is a Sophist, it is to his credit that he has actually read some good works; and although in Plato's account he speaks at great length, it is to his credit that he introduces some useful points."⁶⁰

In accordance with one of the main strains of his philosophy, Ficino tries to find a consistency between the Judaic-Christian and pagan traditions without excluding sophistry, which he believes is connected to the history of Revelation. More specifically, Ficino considers the myth narrated by Protagoras in his oration to be a useful pagan allegory for the Hebrew-Christian message. In fact, the story that involves the unexperienced Epimetheus, the repairer Prometheus, and the wise Jupiter agrees with the biblical interpretation of mankind as being born from the earth as a last creation of God. In Ficino's words: "In the same way, remember that, according to Moses, man was created from earth and was created last. Again, in the Mosaic tradition, the world had a

⁵⁸ See M. Ficino. *Platonic Theology*. Eds. M. J. B. Allen and J. Hankins. Vol. I. Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. viii-ix.

⁵⁹ J. Dillon and G. Tania, eds. *The Greek Sophists*. 5.

⁶⁰ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 68. "Ad haec Protagoras longis probat ambagibus doceri posse virtutem. In quibus notanda quedam priscorum refert mystria. Decet emquamvis sophista sit, nonnulla etiam legisse bona, et cum prolixè loquatur apud Platonem, utilia quaedam adducere" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1297-1298).

beginning.”⁶¹ The Ficinian interpretation converts Protagoras into a servant of true religion and theology.

Ficino also interprets other segments of the oration allegorically in order to render Protagoras consistent with Platonism and Christian religion. Two segments are particularly significant. First, the fire given by Prometheus to civilize mankind refers to the Platonic dialectic, “because fire, like dialectic, divides, resolves, defines, and demonstrates, and because the rational faculty, like fire, illumines the intellect, fires the will, and raises both on high.”⁶² Interestingly, according to Ficino, the myth, as narrated by the sophist, should be interpreted as praise for Platonism, which is apparently not a paradox from Ficino’s perspective. Second, the intervention of Jupiter, which results in the gift of civic virtue to men, represents God’s giving of the capacity for understanding and practicing justice for the common good.⁶³

Ficino’s entire allegorical interpretation of Protagoras’ oration might be read as an attempt to answer a central question: why does Plato allow Protagoras to perform so long speech? Ficino must have seen here a sign of divine intervention that brought the sophist Protagoras to use his rhetorical skills in support of the true philosophy and religion. This is probably the most original of Ficino’s contributions to the interpretation of this

⁶¹ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 69. “Proinde memento hominem hic quemadmodum et apud Moysen ex terra, et postremo creatum, item more quasi Mosaico mundum initium habuisse” (Ficino. *Opera*. 1298). For the connection between the Mosaic tradition and Protagoras’ oration see also Ficino’s letter *Lex et Iustitia* in M. Ficino. *Lettere I. Epistolarum familiarium liber I*. Ed. S. Gentile. Olschki: Firenze, 1990. 17-18.

⁶² Farndell. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 69. “Quia ignis similiter dividit, resolvit, definit atque demonstrat. Item quia rationalis facultas ignis instar illuminat intellectum, accendit voluntatem, et utrunque elevat sublimia” (Ficino. *Opera*. 1298). For the myth of Prometheus and its allegorical interpretation, see also M. J. B. Allen. *Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary*. University of California Press: Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1975. 238-245. On Prometheus in Ficino’s works see M. J. B. Allen. “Prometheus among the Florentines: Marsilio Ficino on the Myth of Triadic Power.” *Rinascimento* 51 (2011): 27-44.

⁶³ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 69. Ficino. *Opera*. 1298.

dialogue, an interpretation that meant to mitigate Plato's war with sophistry, at least temporary.

In his commentary on the *Protagoras*, Ficino mentions several Platonic dialogues that focus on attacking sophistic rhetoricians and their dangerous art. He quotes the *Sophist*, the *Hippias*, the *Euthydemus*, and the *Gorgias*. The latter, already quoted in the commentary on the *Euthydemus*, is particularly significant, for it plays a relevant role in the broader fifteenth-century debate on the validity of rhetoric, as we saw in the first part of this chapter.

Ficino first read the *Gorgias* in the years 1454-1455, when he knew no Greek, in Bruni's Latin translation, copying it for his specific needs.⁶⁴ Among the several *marginalia* that Ficino wrote on his manuscript, there is one reference to *Gorgias* 457a, which is particularly significant. Ficino notes "nulla ars mala est sed qui male utitur arte (*sic*)" ("no art is bad, but the art that is not used properly").⁶⁵ This is evidence of Ficino's interest in the distinction made by the character Gorgias between the value of rhetoric and that of the people who practice it. This detail certainly does not affect Ficino's general aversion to sophistic rhetoric; nevertheless, Gorgias' exculpation of rhetoric was just as remarkable to Ficino as it had been to George of Trebizond and will be to Speroni. When Ficino accomplished his own translation and commentary of the *Gorgias*, as a part of the rebirth of Platonism, he did not hesitate in condemning the sophistic rhetoricians and decided not to develop his note on *Gorgias* 457a any further.

⁶⁴ Venier, ed. *Platonis Gorgias Leonardo Aretino interprete*. 337. Venier refers to the manuscript S 14 sup. (Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana).

⁶⁵ They are all published in Venier, ed. *Platonis Gorgias Leonardo Aretino interprete*. 371.

At the beginning of his commentary, Ficino presents a similarity between sophists, poets, and public orators. In fact, sophists lead people into ignorance, poets disturb the harmony of the soul with their pleasant verses, and orators agitate and mislead the audience. The length of the following citation is justified by the clearness of Ficino's explanation of Plato's broad attack on whoever diverts men's souls from the truth:

Since two things – consciousness and emotion – wield the greatest power in the soul, the Sophist, under the guise of truth, divert men's consciousness towards what is false, while the popular poets, using the bait of harmonious pleasure, frequently hurl the emotions into inharmonious upheavals. Lastly, the popular declaimers deceive men's understanding with their false notions and drive human emotions into multifarious activities.

For this reason, since it is through the assiduity of these people that the minds of men are made to grow sickly through false opinions and harmful emotions, Plato, the physician of men's souls, draws us, quite unreservedly, far away from the Sophists and also, to some extent, from orators and poets. Indeed, he banishes all Sophists, wherever they are.

However, he does not ban all poets, but merely those who fabricate disgraceful accounts of the gods and those who are keen to repeat and recount the agitations in men's souls; and these he does not ban from every place, but from the city, that is, from the crowd of the young and ignorant who are easily inclined

to become agitated and to fail to appreciate the allegorical meanings intended by the poets.⁶⁶

Ficino highlights Plato's effort to preserve man's soul from any kind of disease. The reference to the condemnation of a particular kind of poet, specifically those harmful for the city, connects Plato's *Gorgias* to the *Republic* and strengthens the link between the question of the validity of rhetoric and the creation of the ideal state. This link also concerns orators, as Ficino specifies in the following passage:

But to go back to the orators: Plato does not reproach all of these, either, but only those who assiduously apply themselves to persuading their hearers of anything they please, without any reason or discrimination, whether it be something bad or good, a false principle or a true one, or whether it be rhetoric to excite compassion or stir sedition, or rhetoric based on conjecture.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 109. "Cum duo quaedam in animo potissima sint, cognitio et affectus, cognitionem quidem sophistae sub veritatis specie ad falsa detorquent, affectum vero populares poetae sub concinnae voluptatis esca in dissonas perturbationes saepe praecipitant. Oratores denique populares tum cognitionem falsis decipiunt coniecturis, tum affectum in motus varios concitant. Quapropter cum horum opera mentes hominum tum falsis opinionibus, tum perniciosis affectibus aegrotare cogantur, Plato humanorum medicus animorum nos a sophistis quidem omnino, ab oratoribus quoque atque poetis quodammodo procul abducit, profecto sophistas et undique et omnes exterminat, poetas autem neque omnes, sed illos qui vel turpia de diis et fingunt, vel perturbationes animos acrius imitantur, et referunt, neque undique, sed ex urbe, id est, ex iuvenum ignorantumque turba, qui in perturbationes admodum sunt proclives, et allegoricum poetarum non penetrant sensum" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1315).

⁶⁷ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 109. "Sed ut revertamur ad oratores, hos quoque non omnes Plato vituperat, sed eos duntaxat, qui ad id incumbunt assidue, ut quicquid libuerit, quacunque valeant ratione audientibus persuadeant absque delectu, sive malum id est, sive bonum, seu falsa sit ratio, seu vera, vel commiseratio, vel concitatio, vel coniectura" (Ficino. *Opera*. 1315).

On the contrary, the “true orator” (“legitimus orator”) is required to compose speeches that persuade listeners toward the common good, aiming for what is pleasant to God rather than men’s ears.⁶⁸ According to Ficino’s perspective, since Platonism anticipates the Christian religion, the ultimate goal of any human activity, including good rhetoric, is the divine sphere.

The commentary then focuses on the dialogue between Gorgias and Socrates, where Ficino highlights Gorgias’ incapacity in defining his specific kind of rhetoric. Gorgias, pushed by Socrates’ interrogation, is finally obliged to describe his rhetoric as a practice for persuading people in political contest as well as in court. Furthermore, the rhetorician presented by Gorgias does not have any knowledge of the content he conveys and can persuade only an ignorant audience.

Nevertheless, as Ficino recognizes, Plato’s *Gorgias* does not condemn all rhetoric. Indeed, Socrates presents a philosophical rhetoric to oppose the popular or sycophantic rhetoric that Gorgias applies. The former is an art that leads to the true good; the latter is only an empirical practice that leads to pleasure. Ficino points out that Plato, “who is by far the most eloquent of all” (“longe omnium eloquentissimus”), approves philosophical rhetoric as a healthy art comparable to medicine.⁶⁹

As mentioned previously, Ficino chose not to recall the strong argument of Gorgias regarding the necessity of distinguishing between rhetoric and evil rhetoricians, which is proven by the fact that his note on Bruni’s translation does not have any place in his commentary. Indeed, the insertion of Gorgias’ argument would have strongly challenged Ficino’s defense of Socrates/Plato and weakened the Platonic front. For the same reasons,

⁶⁸ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 110. Ficino. *Opera*. 1315.

⁶⁹ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*. 113. Ficino. *Opera*. 1317.

Ficino proposes his interpretation in order to transform the powerful Callicles' attack against Socrates' method of arguing (*Gorgias* 482c-483c) – analyzed above – into a Platonic weapon against sophists: “when Callicles corrects Socrates for being too keen on subtleties, understand that Sophists, in the person of Socrates, are being refuted by Plato.”⁷⁰ As James Hankins notes, in this case “Ficino is compelled to subvert the integrity of Callicles' dialogical persona” in the attempt of directing Callicles' words in a Platonic direction.⁷¹ This attempt, as much as the attempt to present Protagoras's “great discourse” as a prefiguration of the true philosophy and religion, unveils quite an interesting aspect of Ficino's own rhetoric, which, in some respects, is not so far from the sophists he condemned, although different in its goal.

Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, George of Trebizond, Teodoro Gaza, and Marsilio Ficino represented the most important interpreters of ancient sophistry as the first to recover it through Latin translations and commentaries on Plato's work, the most important source in these respects. Plato was not only significant as the principal vehicle for sophistic speeches, arguments and theories, but also as the creator of sophist characters in dialogues who express feelings, passions, conflicting aspects of their personality, and, finally, their humanity. Plato made them more alive than Parmenides, the Eleatic philosopher that he highly estimated, and as much as Socrates, his mentor and voice in his dialogues. Sperone Speroni and his contemporaries found in Plato's dialogues and their fifteenth-century commentaries a paramount resource and path to explore the fascinating world of the sophists. Even more, they found the most dramatic

⁷⁰ Farndell, ed. *Gardens of Philosophy*, 115. “Proinde ubi Callicles Socratem corrigit quasi argutiarum nimium studiosum, intellige sub persona Socratis Sophistas a Platone redargui” (Ficino. *Opera*. 1318).

⁷¹ For an analysis of Ficino's concordist tendency in mitigating Plato's hostility toward sophists and weakening sophists' arguments, see Hankins. *Plato*. i. 325-328.

cultural conflict of ancient Greece vividly represented and ready to be discussed in the vernacular.

Chapter II

Speroni and the sophists

Sofista è imitatore, il quale non è niente e simiglia ogni cosa [...]

sofista è lo esser nostro, perché non è e pare essere

Speroni. *In difesa dei sofisti (Opere. V. 432)*

1. *Orator et philosophus*

Sperone Speroni degli Alvarotti was Pietro Pomponazzi's pupil at the University of Bologna, where he was educated as an Aristotelian. He taught logic and philosophy at the University of Padua and in 1541 was elected "principe" of the "Accademia degli infiammati." Speroni lived in Rome from 1560 to 1564 and then 1573 to 1578, attracted by the cultural environment of the city that he found so different from Padua and definitely more fascinating. Forced to go back to Padua, in 1580 he wrote to his daughter Giulia of how he wanted to spend his life in Rome: "è la mia intenzione di non morire in Padova, ove voi siete, ma a Roma ove sapete che io voglio andare."⁷² Speroni did not succeed in his attempt and died in Padua, where he was buried. After his death, he was represented in various portraits up through the eighteenth century. At least two of these portraits have an inscription honoring the author for his achievements. The

⁷² Quoted in M. Milani. "L'ultimo testamento di Sperone Speroni." *Sperone Speroni*. Padova: Editoriale Programma, 1989. 269-273. 270.

inscription under the monument made by Marcantonio de Sordi in Palazzo della Ragione (Padua) says “Sperono Speronio Sapientiss[imo] Eloquentiss[imo]”, while the portrait by Hieronimus David and published in Giacomo Filippo Tomasini, *Illustrium virorum elogio iconibus exornata* (Patavii 1630) says “Speronus Speronius Patavinus Philosophus et Orator.”⁷³ Although the two inscriptions might suggest a peaceful coexistence of philosophy and rhetoric in Speroni’s intellectual life, several of his works witness to his scanty interest in metaphysics and rejection of the most dogmatic aspects of the Platonic tradition.

Between 1560 and 1564 Speroni attended meetings of the Roman “Accademia delle notti vaticane”, founded by cardinal Carlo Borromeo, where he gave speeches and commented on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.⁷⁴ As a member of the academy, Speroni chose the pseudonym Nestor, the Greek mythological character, model of rhetorical skills and author of several speeches in both the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. Homer describes Nestor as a wonderful orator, whose words streamed like honey from his mouth (*Iliad* I, 248-9). The pseudonym is mostly appropriate considering that Speroni was a popular orator both in and out of the academic environment. After he quit teaching philosophy at the University of Padua in 1528, Speroni kept participating actively in the Paduan civic life until his death, first as a member of the Council and then as a magistrate of the city for several

⁷³ For a study on the iconographic tradition, see E. Saccomani. “... Dal naturale, come fe già Tiziano...’ I ritratti di Sperone Speroni.” *Sperone Speroni*. Padova: Editoriale Programma, 1989. 257-267.

⁷⁴ On this Roman academy, mostly unexplored, see L. Berra. *L’Accademia delle Notti Vaticane fondata da San Carlo Borromeo*. Roma: Bretschneider, 1915; and A. Sala. *Biografia di San Carlo Borromeo*. Milano: Ditta Boniardi-Pogliani di Ermenegildo Besozzi, 1858. 440-442. Sermons and other documents are collected in G. A. Sassi, *Noctes Vaticanae seu sermones habiti in Academia a S. Carlo Borromeo Romae in Palatio Vaticano istituta*. Mediolani: apud Joseph Marellum, 1748. Speroni’s broader participation in the Roman intellectual life is described in F. Cammarosano. *La vita e le opere di Sperone Speroni*. Empoli: Tipografia R. Nocchioli, 1920. 134-139; and in M. Pozzi. “Nota introduttiva.” *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. Ed. M. Pozzi. Tome II. Milano: Ricciardi, 1996. 478-481.

years. Furthermore, because of his rhetorical ability, he served as an emissary to Venice for a variety of purposes.⁷⁵

This chapter examines Speroni's defense of rhetoric with particular regard to the role of ancient sophists and their perspectives. Remarkably, this defense often addresses the ancient sophists and their ideas about language, communication and truth as models for his time, while his criticism of Plato's dialogues against sophists shows that when rhetoric and philosophy are incompatible, Speroni chooses the first, even in its most controversial form. In his monograph Jean-Louis Fournel underlined the uniqueness of Speroni's position towards sophistry in early modern and modern culture. Far before the recovery of the sophists' works in the Nineteenth Century, from Hegel to Nietzsche, Speroni understood that Plato's position towards the sophists misleads the reader and does not allow him to understand their original message.⁷⁶ This brings Speroni to reconsider the sophists' perspectives as valuable tools for understanding the nature of the human world and operating properly in public life. He uncovers the ancient enemies of Plato as an alternative to a large part of Western philosophical literature. Speroni displays his proposal in several ways and through different genres of vernacular literature that must be examined in detail to appreciate its revolutionary effects.

The first part of this chapter addresses those works in which Speroni presents his ground-breaking approach to sophistry, defending the ancient rhetoricians and their

⁷⁵ See Pozzi. "Nota introduttiva." *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. 472-474.

⁷⁶ J.-L. Fournel. *Les dialogues de Sperone Speroni: liberté de la parole et règles de l'écriture*. Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1990. 218. "Speroni a parfaitement saisi que, pour comprendre la pensée des sophistes, il convenait de lire sans préjugés les interventions que Platon leur prête dans ses dialogues et de ne pas s'attarder aux seules considérations négatives formulées par Socrate. Au XVIème siècle, défendre les sophistes ne va pas de soi. On ne possède évidemment pas d'éditions de leurs fragments puisque celles-ci ne verront le jour qu'à la fin du XIXème siècle, en liaison avec les réflexions sur les présocratiques conduites par Hegel puis par Nietzsche."

perspective, proposing it as the most valuable one for public life, and attacking Socrates and Plato for having unfairly blamed the sophists. The second part of the chapter explores the *Dialogo della retorica*, especially the parts less-considered by scholars, until now, with a particular focus on the last of Brocardo's speeches. In all his writings, Speroni maintains his double nature of philosopher and orator, and revitalizes the long-lasting conflict between metaphysical tradition and rhetoric. He prefers to convey his ideas through flexible and even ambiguous literary forms, rather than treatises, which confirms his preference for dialogue and oratory as a most appropriate approach to the human world. Furthermore, Speroni is the first author to write extensively in the vernacular about one of the most relevant cultural conflicts of the Western tradition, so that a public with no acquaintance with Latin could access this debate.

2. Defense and rehabilitation of sophistry

In Speroni's *oeuvre* the rehabilitation of authors such as Gorgias and Protagoras is part of a larger project to re-establish the central role of rhetoric in the city. Sophistic rhetoric should regain the significance it possessed before Socrates and Plato destroyed it and radically changed the history of Western culture.

Except for Mario Pozzi's and Raffale Girardi's articles, and a chapter of Jean-Louis Fournel's book, scholars have not yet paid attention to the extensive presence of sophistic rhetoric in Speroni's *oeuvre*.⁷⁷ In this first part of the chapter, I intend to

⁷⁷ M. Pozzi. "Speroni e il genere epidittico." *Sperone Speroni*. 55-88; R. Girardi. "Ercole e il Granchio:

contribute to the comprehension of Speroni's arguments supporting the ancient sophistic art by providing a close reading of three significant works of Speroni: *Apologia dei dialoghi*, *In difesa dei Sofisti*, and *Contra Socrate*.⁷⁸

2.1. *Rhetoric: an imperfect science for an imperfect world*

Speroni wrote his *Apologia dei dialoghi* at the end of his life, between the years 1574 and 1575, to defend his dialogues, published for the first time in 1542, before the Catholic Inquisition which considered them, especially the *Dialogo della Discordia* and *Dialogo della Usura*, a possible threat to Christian doctrine and public morality.⁷⁹ In fact, this work is not just a response to the Catholic Inquisition but also a deep and extended clarification and reinterpretation of the author's entire *oeuvre*.

The four parts of the *Apologia* are not clearly connected to each other and seem contradictory on several points. Scholars who have studied this work hold different positions about its general meaning and level of coherency, but for our purposes we will sidestep this issue and look directly at the massive presence of sophistry in the third part, which presents a treasure of information and arguments about ancient sophists and their theories.⁸⁰ This is the most extended work on the subject in Speroni's literary production

figure della 'sostistica speroniana'." *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 167 (1990): 396-411; Fournel. *Les dialogues de Sperone Speroni*. 216-220 and *passim*. A reference to sophistry is also in M. R. Davi. "Filosofia e retorica nell'opera di Sperone Speroni." *Sperone Speroni*. 95-97.

⁷⁸ Unfortunately, these three works, like the majority of Speroni's production, are still waiting for a critical edition as well as an English translation. The passages quoted are from the reliable edition of Speroni's works published in 1740.

⁷⁹ See Fournel. *Les dialogues de Sperone Speroni*. 191-195.

⁸⁰ The main studies which discuss the general meaning of the *Apologia* are R. Girardi. *La società del*

and perhaps in the whole of Renaissance vernacular literature. Furthermore, if one considers that Speroni's *Apologia* is supposed to display his real intention and defend the legitimacy of his entire intellectual life, then the discourse on sophistry in the third part must be recognized as mostly revolutionary. But even if the author were not sincere, and his auto-defense was a work of dissimulation, the *Apologia* would stand as a unique piece of Italian literature.

Regardless of the author's intention, it is striking that such a defense of the sophists was accepted by the Roman Inquisition. One may hypothesize either an indulgent censor, a particular rhetorical expertise of the author in presenting sophistry as acceptable, or perhaps the interesting alternative that the Roman Counter-Reformation environment was more indulgent with sophistry than one might have expected. An example of this tolerant climate could be Antonio Possevino (1533–1611) who emphasized the connection between the second sophistry, whose rhetorician Libanius was a notorious representative, and the Church fathers, like Basilus, in his *Bibliotheca selecta*, published in 1593.⁸¹ Either way, the third part of the *Apologia* is the most appropriate start for exploring the rebirth of the sophists in Speroni's *oeuvre*, for it gives a helpful roadmap to explore his other works.

The third part begins with the author's purpose to end the *Apologia*, but suddenly it becomes the beginning of the rest of his work. In fact, Speroni thinks that he has no more to say on the subject, but his conscience bursts onto the scene as an independent

dialogo. Retorica e ideologia nella letteratura conviviale del Cinquecento. Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1989. 81-106; J. R. Snyder. *Writing the Scene of Speaking. Theories of Dialogue in the Late Italian Renaissance.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989. 91-102; Fournel. *Les dialogues de Sperone Speroni.* 191-223; V. Cox. *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo.* Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 70-78.

⁸¹ M. Fumaroli. *L'âge de l'éloquence: rhétorique et res literaria de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique.* Genève: Droz, 1980. 215-6.

character, like Socrates' *daimon*, claiming to be his invisible spirit, servant and friend of truth ("genio invisibile, servo ed amico alla verità.")⁸² She argues that the author has to complete the apology of his dialogues by leaving the Ciceronian arguing *in utramque partem* and embracing the truth: "all'ultimo lasciando star gli argomenti, che far si vogliono disputando per l'una e l'altra parte, vaglia lo amor della verità."⁸³

Then she claims that he should blame himself along with his dialogues and primarily the *Dialogo della Discordia* which - his conscience says - none of these arrogant sophists ever made: "la qual opra mai non fu fatta da alcun sofista di quelli antichi arroganti."⁸⁴ This is the first mention of sophistry in the third part of the *Apologia* and is remarkably directed towards the author himself while stressing the originality of the subject of the *Diaologo*. Beyond the explicit meaning of the accusation that Speroni cast towards himself, one should notice the implicit self-praise for having achieved what no sophist ever did.

The speech of his conscience incites Speroni to start a new attempt, which actually is not the third part of the defense, but rather a first move for a new assault.⁸⁵ Speroni spends several pages arguing about the three types of decorum that should dignify any dialogue: the decorum of the interlocutors which are introduced in the dialogue ("il decoro delle persone, che si introducono nel dialogo"), the decorum of the writer ("il decoro dello scrittore"), and the decorum of the language ("della natura della favella dearticolata").⁸⁶ The second one is the most relevant for our purpose, for Speroni

⁸² S. Speroni. *Opere [...] tratte da' mss. Originali*. Eds. N. dalle Laste and M. Forcellini. 5 tomes. Venezia: Appresso D. Occhi, 1740. Vol. I. 326.

⁸³ Ibid. 329.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 330-331.

explains that anyone who writes dialogues – including himself – is able to change his being into any kind of character. In other words, every author is a professional deceiver that persuades his readers to laugh by his comedies or cry by his tragedies. The similarity between this type of author and the sophist is not explicitly mentioned, but is easily inferred from the passage below, where Speroni compares the Protean author with the orator:

un buon poeta comico o tragico, uso a cangiarsi nel suo poema in diversi affetti, o d'ira, d'odio, di crudeltà, o di femminee concupiscenze, non possa essere ben costumato: e dir lo stesso dell'oratore, che non insegna, ma vende a prezzo la orazione a chi n'ha bisogno: essendo cosa impossibile che egli commove con sue parole il core e l'animo di chi ascolta e resti fermo in se stesso e non è buono chi non è fermo nella bontà.⁸⁷

The good poet, author of comedies or tragedies, who is used to imitate in his poem different feelings, such as rage, hate, cruelty, and lust, ought to be shameless. The same applies to the orator, who does not teach anything, but rather sells his speech to whomever needs it. Indeed, it is impossible that both poet and orator are able to move the public's heart and soul with their words without changing himself; and such changeable people are far from being virtuous.

If it is true that the third part of the *Apologia*, including the passage above, is an act of self-censorship to avoid the surveillance of the Inquisition, as suggested by

⁸⁷ Ibid. 334-335.

Virginia Cox, then the accusation Speroni is casting on the authors of dialogues with immoral characters is just a further act of his own deception and while his *Apologia* becomes a *mise-en-scene*.⁸⁸ However, what is relevant for our purpose is the similarity between the author of dialogues and the figure of the sophist condemned by Plato; a similarity inspired by Plato himself in his *Euthydemus* (288b-d) where Proteus is presented as a metaphor for any sophist because of his ability to look like whatever he wants.

After having treated the three types of decorum, Speroni brings the reader's attention to rhetoric and how it is applied in the life of a city. He employs the Ciceronian model of orator, engaged in the republic, to argue against the Platonic rejection of rhetoric.

Plato's trope of rhetoric as cookery, not to be considered an art but only an ability to please people's desire, is formulated in his *Gorgias* (462b-e). Speroni explains Plato's interpretation as a reaction caused by his hate for Hippias, Prodicus, Polus, Gorgias, and the other sophists:

Platone, generalmente parlando di tutta l'arte oratoria, alcuna volta in tal bassezza la rivolge che alla cucina l'assimigliava; e credo per l'odio che egli portava a Ippia, Prodico, Polo, Gorgia e a tutta quanta sì fatta scola.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ See Cox. *The Renaissance Dialogue*. 74.

⁸⁹ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 358.

It is noteworthy that Speroni repeats his critique of Plato's trope at least twice in other works of his. Indeed, in the *Dialogo della retorica* the character Brocardo warns his interlocutor Valerio to avoid a misleading opinion about the nature of rhetoric:

non creggiate che la buona arte retorica, di tutte l'arti reina, sia una certa buffoneria da far ridere (benché egli v'abbia di quelli che alla cucina l'assimigliarono).⁹⁰

While in *Dell'arte oratoria* Speroni presents Plato's argument to deny its validity and reaffirm oratory as a legitimate art:

Platone in più luoghi apertamente suol mantenere la rettorica non essere arte, ma perizia o studio, che l'uomo usa a conciliarsi il favore e la grazie degl'ignoranti: e perciò esser specie d'adulazione, rea e turpe per conseguente; ed esser simile alla cucina, cioè alla perizia di ben condire li cibi umani per compiacere al palato.⁹¹

The so-called sophistic school ("scola"), mentioned in the first of the three passages, includes Gorgias of Leontini, his pupils, and the broader group of ancient sophists attacked by Plato. The evil reputation attributed to sophist leads Speroni to deepen its identity. The exploration of this controversial figure is introduced by a picture of Hercules that Speroni recalls from his reading of an anonymous author:

⁹⁰ Pozzi, ed. *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. 648.

⁹¹ Speroni. *Opere*. V. 535.

So aver letto in non vano autore, che anticamente là nella Scitia [...] si aveva per fermo che quel nostro Ercole così forte fosse un sofista de' più eccellenti, che avesse il mondo al suo tempo: e per sofista si dipingeva. La dipintura era questa: un uomo in piede grande e robusto, simile al Greco di Anfitrione, quanto alla clava e alla pelle; ma in ciò diverso oltre modo, che nella lingua, che aveva forata, tenea uno anello, quale hanno i bufoli in cima al naso, onde pendevano catenelle lunghe e sottili di più colori, tutte attaccate agli orecchi di una gran gente di donne e d'uomini d'ogni etade, che gli erano avanti, quasi bramosa dell'ascoltare; significando secondo i Sciti la dipintura, che la sua invitta eloquenzia tenea legati li ascoltatori e faceva farli a suo senno.⁹²

He records how the ancient Scythians believed that Hercules was one of the most excellent sophists and was portrayed as an imposing, strong man; they viewed him as similar to the Greek character Amphitryon for the club and skin he wore, yet different from him in other respects. In fact, he had a pierced tongue with a ring to which numerous chains were attached. They were long, thin, colorful, and connected to women and men of any age who were following him - craving to hear his speeches. According to Scythians - Speroni writes - the picture portrays Hercules' eloquence as invincible and powerful enough to persuade and tie anyone to him.

No scholar has yet recovered the source of Speroni's passage which depicts Hercules as a powerful sophist. The representation that Speroni describes is very close to that provided by the Greek sophist Lucian of Samosata (125-180 CE), quite possibly the

⁹² Speroni. *Opere*. I. 359-360.

useful author (“non vano autore”) mentioned at the beginning of the citation above, in his *Heracles* translated into Latin by Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) in 1506.⁹³ In his work Lucian indeed reports a Gallic version of the representation of the Greek god: “The Celts call Heracles Ogmios in their native tongue, and they portray the god in a very peculiar way. In their opinion, he is extremely old, bald-headed [...] his skin is wrinkled, and he is burned as black as can be, like an old sea-dog.” Even more interesting is the rest of the picture:

That old Heracles of theirs drags after him a great crowd of men who are all tethered by the ears! His leashes are delicate chains fashioned of gold and amber, resembling the prettiest of necklaces. Yet, though led by bonds so weak, the men do not think of escaping, as they easily could, and they do not pull back at all or brace their feet and lean in the opposite direction to that in which he is leading them. In fact they follow cheerfully and joyously, applauding their leader.⁹⁴

Then Lucian finds particularly striking a specific detail of the picture: “Since the painter had no place to which he could attach the ends of the chains, as the god’s right hand already held the club and his left the bow, he pierced the tip of his tongue and represented him drawing the men by that means!”⁹⁵

Lucian narrates that while he was looking at this strange picture, a Celt approached and told him “we Celts do not agree with you Greeks in thinking that Hermes

⁹³ For the Latin translations of Lucian and his legacy in the early Renaissance, see D. Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins. Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999.

⁹⁴ Lucian of Samosata. *Heracles*. Ed. A. M. Harmon, Princeton University Press: London-New York, 1913. 63.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 65.

is Eloquence: we identify Heracles with it, because he is far more powerful than Hermes. And don't be surprised if he is represented as an old man, for eloquence and eloquence alone is wont to show its full vigour in old age."⁹⁶ After having quoted Homer's *Iliad* about Nestor's oratory, as a further case of an old man with powerful eloquence, the Celt concludes his explanation and gives his interpretation of the allegorical meaning of Heracles' weapon:

In general, we consider that the real Heracles was a wise man who achieved everything by eloquence and applied persuasion as his principal force. His arrows represent words, I suppose, keen, sure and swift, which make their wounds in souls. In fact, you yourselves admit that words are winged.⁹⁷

I could not find any source closer than this to Speroni's description and even if Lucian replaces the Scythians with the Celts, the essential part of the allegory is kept. If Lucian is the source of Speroni's version of the eloquent Hercules, then the definition of the Greek sophist Lucian as a respectable ("non vano") author in Speroni's passage is quite remarkable. Perhaps, Speroni did not explicitly mention him in his *Apologia* in order to avoid any further issue with the Catholic Inquisition.

There is a further difference between Lucian and Speroni in the way they describe the picture. While in the former Hercules stands for eloquence in general, in the latter, Hercules is no longer simply an orator but also one of the most excellent sophists ("un

⁹⁶ Ibid. 65-67.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 67. The flourish fortune of the Celtic Hercules in literature and arts was explored by R. E. Hallowell. "Ronsard and the Gallic Hercules Myth." *Studies in the Renaissance* 9 (1962): 242-255.

sofista dei più eccellenti”). This suggests that Speroni either considers rhetoric/oratory and sophistry as synonymous or that he considers sophistry as the most valuable part of rhetorical art and oratorical practice. In either case, Speroni rehabilitates sophistry by connecting it to one of the most popular and doubtlessly positive figures of classical mythology. One cannot think of a better way to ennoble sophistry and bring it into the inner circle of the liberal arts.

After describing the Scythian Hercules, Speroni expresses his disagreement with common interpretations of the picture. He claims to believe that the orator, who has no personal interest in doing his profession, is dragged by his listeners and forced to think how they think, rather than the opposite, so that one can say he is a victim of his audience:

Io allo ‘ncontro confesso il fatto, ma non consento generalmente al significato: anzi ho per fermo che l’oratore, che fuor dell’arte della rettorica attende ad altro che alla sua causa, sia egli tratto per viva forza senza avvedersi da questo e quello delli ascoltanti, a ragionare a loro modo, e sia da essi signoreggiato.⁹⁸

This seems an anticipation of the polemic that Speroni engages in with Socrates and Plato in his *In difesa dei sofisti* and *Contra Socrate*. As we will see later in the exploration of these two *trattatelli*, in Plato’s dialogues the sophist is often forced to leave his specific sphere and compelled by his interlocutors to reason and discuss about topics outside of his duty, so that he is actually a victim of contempt. While the picture is usually seen as

⁹⁸ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 360.

an allegory of the power of eloquence, Speroni reverses this interpretation hinting that it is rhetoric which falls in disfavor. According to Speroni's interpretation, Hercules represents rhetoric banished from the very cities it contributed to shaping:

direi più tosto [...] chi ha legato questo [i.e Ercole] infelice a cotanti orecchi? Che non direi in contrario: chi gli ha legati alla lingua tutti gli orecchi di sì gran turba? Ma comunque noi siamo in dubbio di tal legame di orecchi e lingua nella orazione dello eloquente, non è già dubbio che la rettorica [...] è poco cara al presente alle repubbliche italiane, ed assai meno alle oltramontane; o sia perciò che così si vuole, o forse è colpa dei miei dialoghi e d'altri scritti non molto onesti, che gli assomigliano; nelle lordure delle quali opre sendo bruttata la gentilezza oratoria e guasto il fior della bontà sua, non è ragione che ci dobbiamo meravigliare se or si caccia delle cittadi, che son fattura della sua voce.⁹⁹

According to Speroni's analysis, rhetoric was banished from the cities that were founded thanks to its power of gathering citizens' consensus for the common interest. And an even worse situation occurred abroad. In the spirit of the *Apologia*, Speroni includes himself among the authors that possibly ruined the reputation of rhetoric, but above all he denounces the ingratitude of the republics that rejected orators as their worst enemies instead of rewarding them for their service. Plato's *Republic* is, of course, the archetypical work for this tendency as well as a model for contemporary cities.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 360.

It is noteworthy that Speroni writes in the vernacular to denounce what he considered to be the Platonic origin of the modern political trend, while part of the Italian vernacular production at that time was proposing Platonism as an antidote rather than a problem. In fact, the second half of the Cinquecento is roughly the period when some Italian authors proposed the Platonic political ideal as an alternative model to the Aristotelianism of the Counter-Reformation. Pamphilo Fiorimbene's translation of Plato's *Republic* and Ciro Spontoni's *La corona del principe* ("the Crown of the Prince") - published with his translation *I commenti di Marsilio Ficino sopra i dieci dialoghi del giusto* ("Marsilio Ficino's Commentaries to the Ten Dialogues on Justice") - are two significant examples, the former at the beginning and the latter at the end of this tendency.¹⁰⁰

All the matter about sophists is so interesting that Speroni decides to postpone the conclusion of the third part of his *Apologia* and continues to explore the subject. He goes on to discuss a certain dialogue that might have actually occurred in the Roman house of Cardinal Amulio (Marcantonio da Mula):

Li sofisti che io nominai con quella Scitica dipintura m'hanno recato alla mente uno assai lungo, per vero dirne, ma non gia' inetto ragionamento, tenuto in casa altra volta e nella presenza del cardinale Amulio da alcuni belli intelletti; udendo io sempre mai senza dir nulla, tanto fui vago dell'ascoltare.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ P. Fiorimbene. *La repubblica di Platone, tradotta dalla lingua greca nella thoscana [...]*, Venezia, appr. G. Giolito de Ferrari, 1554. C. Spontoni. *La corona del principe. I commenti di Marsilio Ficino sopra i dieci dialoghi del giusto*. Verona: presso G. Discepolo, 1590. The matter is discussed in T. Katinis. "Il platonismo politico nell'età della Controriforma: Ciro Spontoni dalla *Corona del principe* ai *Dodici libri del governo di Stato*." *Storia del pensiero politico* 4 (2014) (in press).

¹⁰¹ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 361.

With this introduction, the reader is virtually invited to listen to the discussion among Amulio, Bernardo Cappello, Constantin Ralli, Paulo Manuzio, Silvio Antoniano, and Speroni himself as a silent spectator. It is a carnival evening and Amulio asks the guests to tell him about the debate they attended a few hours ago. Cappello tells how they talked about the new sophists who often bring confusion to every science by using unclear Latin words, such as *essentia* and *quidditas*, and who apparently have no goal outside of maintaining the privilege of being called philosophers.¹⁰² In the first part of the dialogue Amulio and Cappello agree to consider sophistry as a general name for a large group of human arts that share the particular use of language as a means of persuasion. Poetry is a kind of sophistry because of its effect on men's soul, and tragedy too because of its power to lead spectators to cry and, at the same time, enjoy their crying.¹⁰³

Cappello presents anecdotes about sophistic arguments, including the well known paradox *omnis homo mendax* that reveals an interesting connection with skepticism. Metaphors and allegories then follow, such as the popular battle of Hercules (the image of a true philosopher) against a gigantic crab representing any kind of sophist.

The allegory of Hercules fighting the monster is particularly noteworthy because it sheds light on the relationship between Speroni and one of the first Italian humanists, Coluccio Salutati. According to Raffaele Girardi, indeed, Cappello reverses the meaning that Salutati gave to the allegory in his *De laboribus Herculis*.¹⁰⁴ In fact, Salutati considers Hercules the personification of the capacity of reason in fighting and defeating

¹⁰² Ibid. 361-362.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 363-367.

¹⁰⁴ C. Salutati. *De laboribus Herculis*. Ed. B. L. Ullman. Zurich: Thesaurus Mundi, 1952. 191. On Girardi's interpretation, see his "Ercole e il Granchio: figure della 'sostica speroniana'." 398-400.

ignorance and vice, following two classical *loci*, Plato's *Phaedon* (89c) and *Euthydemus* (297c); while Cappello presents a weak Hercules incapable of achieving his victory. Girardi draws the conclusion that Speroni recognizes the limit of philosophical reason and suggests adopting a probabilistic approach to the human world. Although Girardi's interpretation points out an important part of Speroni's perspective about the state of sciences and arts, I think that this specific passage is not the best demonstration of this thesis; I would argue instead that Cappello, the character who is reporting the allegory, seems to be enjoying a semi-serious conversation about the risk of facing a sophist rather than establishing a comprehensive view of life. As we will see, reading the end of the third part of the *Apologia*, the character in charge of drafting a new philosophy based on the reevaluation of sophistry is actually Amulio.

Going back to the carnival evening, Amulio calls upon Manuzio to give his opinion on Cicero's rhetorical art, which is supposed to have some kind of relationship with sophistry. Manuzio summarizes Cicero's opinion, clarifying what a sophist is and also defending him:

Cicerone nell'*Oratore*, se ben ricordo, tiene per fermo, quello esser vero oratore il quale orando move li affetti delli ascoltanti; e che in contrario il sofista non solo li move, ma li corregge ed acqueta [...]. Dunque il sofista secondo lui non uomo vano o nugace, nè ingannatore nè falsatore della rettorica, ma buona e dolce persona.¹⁰⁵

105 Speroni. *Opere*. I. 368.

Constantino Ralli underlines how Cicero's opinion is far from those of both Aristotle and Plato.¹⁰⁶ Afterward, Speroni and Silvio Antoniano are asked to express their opinions. Speroni, as interlocutor in the dialogue, lets Silvio speak on his behalf.¹⁰⁷ Silvio then refers to a discussion that happened elsewhere, probably in a meeting of the “Accademia delle notti vaticane.”¹⁰⁸

It is important to note that Speroni is very cautious in his writing. Although he includes himself among the interlocutors, he lets someone else speak for him; moreover, Silvio claims that he will only report what others said. The plurality of levels in such a narration – Speroni, as authorial voice of his *Apologia dei dialoghi*, tells of a dialogue where Silvio reports on another dialogue – ensures a certain degree of safety from the Inquisition, via this narrative distance.

After his initial claims, Silvio presents the speech of the anonymous “accademico di palazzo” (“academic of court”) who provided a summary of the history of the sophistic art, paying particular attention to the shifting meaning of “sophist.” Initially, all the wise men, including Solon, Thales and Pythagoras, were called sophists. Socrates was the first to demonize this name. In spite of Socrates’ condemnation, the “accademico” suggested that we ought to appreciate Gorgias’ speech about Helen of Troy and Protagoras’ most beautiful oration - probably the so-called “great discourse” of Protagoras in Plato’s *Protagoras* (323a-328d). Moreover, he recalled the significant public role played by several sophists who also served as ambassadors. Centuries later, a second generation of

106 Ibid. 370.

107 “Io quella ora non aveva voglia di ragionare: però pregai M. Silvio, come persona che potea farlo, che mi togliesse da tale imbarazzo” (Ibid. 371).

108 “Io Signor nostro, da ora innanzi non dirò nulla, ma gli altrui detti rinarrarò [...]. Dico adunque che uno accademico di palazzo parlò una sera distintamente delli sofisti e dell'arte loro, senza nessuna sofisteria” (Ibid. 372).

sophists arose – which modern scholars call the Second Sophistic. One of the most famous, in Athens, was the rhetorician Libanius, friend of the Emperor Julian and Saint Basilus.¹⁰⁹

Afterwards, the “accademico” clarified that Socrates’ attacks, which are sophisms themselves, were mostly against the greedy sophists and sophists’ confusion about debating (“disputare”) and lecturing (“orare”).¹¹⁰ Common people concluded that every sophist should be condemned, and thus, greedy sophists ruined the reputation of wise men.¹¹¹ That made the world full of miserable sophists who used languages – especially Greek and Latin – to impress the listeners without expressing any clear relationship between words and concepts. According to the “accademico,” it is necessary to point out a semantic distinction in order to avoid an unfair condemnation of the sophistic art:

Confusamente insin ora, per quel che io creda, si è ragionato intorno a questa materia; ove era bene che si distinguesse tra sofisteria e sofista. E questo bene non si è ancor fatto dalli scrittori, né so perché. Farollo io. La sofisteria è artificio o perizia, onde Gorgia verbi grazia era sofista denominato: ma il sofista è quell'uomo che suole usarla ed adoperarla. E questa loro diversità non solamente è di voce e vocaboli ma è di vere e reali cose.¹¹²

109 Ibid. 373.

110 Ibid. 377-378.

111 Ibid. 379.

112 Ibid. 383.

After a metaphor is used to clarify the difference between the accidental and substantial features of an object – in the Aristotelian sense – the “accademico” concluded his argumentation:

Così un sofista può esser reo e tristo uomo senza alcun biasimo di quella arte, quando è sofista denominato. Perciocché il vizio è in molti uomini, che non son punto sofisti; e la sofistica facoltà, come è già stata, così può essere più che mai in buone e dotte persone.¹¹³

A sophist may be guilty without shaming the sophistic art. The vice is in many persons who are not sophists, while the sophistic art can be performed by good and learned people, as it was in the past. Remarkably, this passage reproduces the argument in defense of rhetoric presented by the character Gorgias of Leontini against Socrates' attack in Plato's *Gorgias* (456c-457c). As we saw in the first chapter, the same argument drew the attention of humanists, such as George of Trebizond and Marsilio Ficino, because of its efficacy. Thanks to Speroni's vernacular formulation, the same argument reached a broader public for the very first time.

Afterward, the “accademico” more closely defined the sophistic art and found valuable support for his purpose in Aristotle's paradigm of sciences. He argued that sophistry is an imperfect science that produces imperfect and incomplete knowledge, while – according to Aristotle - a perfect science can explain something through its cause proceeding with certainty:

¹¹³ Ibid. 383.

La facoltà della sofistica è scienza, ma imperfetta. Perfetta è quella che noi abbiamo di alcuna cosa per la cagione del suo essere, e che ella sia sua cagione, e che altrimenti non possa essere né sapersi [...]. Chiama Aristotile questo sapere, che egli ha così difinito, semplicemente sapere; cioè certo e perfetto, che via levi ogni dubbio, che possa aversi in alcun quesito. Che ove è dubbio non è certezza; e chi è incerto di qualche cosa, non si può dire che egli la sappia di intera e certa scienza, ma è sofistico il suo sapere.¹¹⁴

The statement is clearly based on the classical Aristotelian pattern of different types of knowledge, distinguished by different levels of certainty and specific methods of investigation. The “accademico” gave a good summary of Aristotle's position about the validity of each science and rhetoric in particular. He tied his point to the *schema* outlined in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, modifying, however, part of it. The “accademico” argued that, according to the Stagirite, we acquire a perfect knowledge through demonstration, opinion through dialectic syllogism and induction, and persuasive arguments through enthymemes and examples. At the same time, persuasion and opinion are sophistic types of knowledge, because of their intrinsic uncertainty and not because they are intentionally deceptive:

la scienza certa e perfetta per la dimostrazione acquistiamo; la opinione per sillogismo e induzione; e la persuasione per entimema ed esempio. Vuole

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 385.

insomma Aristotile, che la persuasione e l'opinione, quantunque buone e diritte, siano sofistiche conoscenze. Son dunque tali non per inganno, che vi sia entro; che ciò è colpa e malizia della persona, di cui non parlo al presente: ma per difetto della certezza, la quale in esse per lor natura non si ritrova.¹¹⁵

Aristotle actually endorses sophistry less than this passage suggests. In fact, on the one hand Aristotle recognizes a relationship between dialectic and rhetoric, while his *Rhetoric* seems to accept some forms of sophistic rhetoric as well; on the other hand he does not consider the entire domain of opinions as a part of sophistry. Speroni, though, connects sophistry and dialectic more closely than Aristotle, perhaps by emphasizing the passages in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1404a, 1408b) in which Gorgias' art is pointed out as an example of rhetorical ability.

According to the “accademico”, sophistry aims to persuade and create opinions and deals with politics and ethics. In these fields, knowledge is always probabilistic and findings are changeable. The last part of the “accademico's” speech is particularly interesting with regard to the relationship between the sophistic art and civil life. The sophist is the ‘scientist’ of public life, and civil activities (“opere cittadinesche”) are his field. Finally, the sophist is asked to deal with common beliefs and to create consensus, as rhetoricians used to do in the ancient Greek and Latin worlds.

As we mentioned earlier, the whole dialogue is set during a carnival evening, when jokes and ambiguous speeches are permitted. In the word of cardinal Amulio: “il sofista, siccome vano che egli è, non pare indegna materia che se ne parli nel carnassale

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 386.

[sic]”, but since the carnival is ending and the Lent (“suo contrario”) is coming, the cardinal wants to finish the dialogue summarizing the most important ideas discussed so far.¹¹⁶

The function of Amulio’s last speech is to prepare the forth part of the *Apologia* where the discourse on contemplative topics, guided by faith in God, should replace all the controversial subjects of the third part. Given the fact that Amulio’s speech has the function of guiding the reader from the earthly world, symbolized by the carnival, to a divine dimension, where the intellect is exposed to the true light, we should consider the words of the cardinal the most truthful in the dialogue.

Amulio summarizes the whole matter in a comprehensive view of the human world, a *Weltanschauung* – to use a modern term – conveyed in few sentences. Amulio begins his speech quoting the anonymous “accademico di palazzo:”

Quella fu vera sentenza: [...] tutto il mondo è sofista, cioè pien di sofisterie. Ma fu imperfetta quella parola, perché doveva aggiungere, che ‘l mondo anche esso è sofista. Dell’una e dell’altra farò parola. Sono mundane sofisterie non solamente le opinion e persuasion delli uomini intorno al vivere cittadino [...] ma eziandio le scienze che noi chiamiamo dimostrative.

Therefore, according to Amulio, sophistry includes more than we thought. Specifically, any thing that our intellect produces is a type of sophism, while what is above our

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 389.

intellect is beyond sophistry but also impossible to understand because of our human limits. Amulio clarifies his view further:

Tutto l'avanzo delle scienze contemplative è veramente di cose alte e gentili, ma tanto ascose [...] che non è occhio mortale che veder sappia la loro origine interamente. Quindi nasce la varietà dei pareri colla ostinazione del defender ciascuno il suo, la qual cosa mal si può fare senza l'aiuto della importuna sofisteria: perciocché il vero non è più d'uno, e mille sono le vanitadi che si raggirano intorno ad esso senza toccarlo [...] tutte queste son manifeste sofisterie.¹¹⁷

Apparently, even the contemplative dimension is involved in sophistry when we try to represent it with our human intellectual and linguistic means. The annoying sophistry (“importuna sofisteria”) is part of being human and the only type of knowledge human beings can achieve. Even if we can assume the existence of a sole truth, we dwell in a world made of conflicting representations that we crafted because we cannot proceed differently. According to this theory, any man is naturally a poet, in the original meaning of the Greek word *poiesis*, a demiurge of his own dimension that competes with others of the same kind.

Amulio's speech is certainly far beyond Platonism as well as Aristotelianism. In fact, the cardinal, to whom Speroni leaves the last words of the carnival to introduce the approaching Lent, presents the Platonic cave as man's actual homeland and the

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 390.

Aristotelian boundary between demonstrations and sophistic arguments as a fictitious limit.

2.2. *The defense of sophists*

Speroni's two *trattatelli*, *In difesa dei sofisti* and *Contra Socrate*, are much more explicitly against Plato's perspective on sophistry. As the other *trattatelli*, they should have been written as first drafts for possible dialogues or orations. It would have been very interesting to read these final results, but unfortunately Speroni never wrote them.

Speroni's *In difesa dei sofisti* attacks the entirety of Plato's anti-sophistic work. It is amazing to read such an evaluation of Plato and the sophists in a sixteenth-century text, which differs completely from the standard interpretation at that time. Speroni's *incipit* is a declaration of war. He claims that when the ancient sophists disappeared, valuable thinkers were lost, and Plato is responsible for this loss. Before Plato, 'sophist' was an honorable title; after him it became a shameful name: "gran perdita è stata quella dei sofisti, della quale n'ha colpa Platone maggior sofista di loro. E prima si gloriavano gli uomini d'esser sofisti; or per cagion di Platone se ne vergognano."¹¹⁸

Speroni then recalls the usual distinction between the philosopher, a contemplative thinker who does not pursue any kind of useful aim, and the sophist, who does not care about the essence of virtues. Speroni admires especially Gorgias, an excellent orator ("oratore eccellentissimo"), and clarifies that the rhetorical art called

¹¹⁸ Speroni. *Opere*. V. 430.

sophistry is based on habits and movement (“sul costume e sul movimento”). This kind of rhetoric is made for the city and public life. Speroni underlines the distance between sophistry and philosophy:

Il sofista vuol, e la città vuol, che l'onor nostro e la gloria consista nell'opinione delle persone, cioè del volgo: ma il filosofo sapiente non già; ma parlando della natura dell'uomo, vorrà che seguiti di necessità la scienza e la virtù, e non dipenda dala opinione del vulgo; anzi si scosti da lui, perché è ignorante della natura ed essenza di esso onore.¹¹⁹

As we discussed in the first chapter, Gorgias had already interested several authors in the fifteenth century, such as Leonardo Bruni, George of Trebizond, Teodoro Gaza, but Speroni goes beyond their defense of rhetoric and does not hesitate to attack Plato as a sophist of the worst kind - one who used to make his victims vulnerable by exposing them to people's judgment:

Platone [...] con fallacia disputava contro i sofisti, dimandandoli della natura ed essenza d'alcune cose, le quali non erano sapute da' sofisti, perché non bisognava loro, come sofisti, saperle. E ciò faceva Platone alla presenza del vulgo, dinanzi al quale il sofista non osava dir di non sapere ogni cosa per non perdere il credito.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 431.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Plato unfairly questioned sophists about essences and eternal forms that were not their concern, since dealing with metaphysics was not their duty. Speroni is actually promoting a revolutionary interpretation suggesting that the reader invert his usual perspective: Plato is no longer a hero fighting the worst men in Greece. Rather, sophists were the victims of a man who was worse than any other sophist. Plato shares his guilt with Socrates, who sought the essence of civil virtues for influencing civil life, confusing ethics with physics and metaphysics:

[Socrate] non doveva cercare la essenza ma l'uso della virtù [...] ognuno poteva conoscere che cosa fosse virtù, ma [...] pochi sapevano esercitarla, ove e come si conveniva secondo l'uso della repubblica; e [...] se la scienza della virtù è una, perocché una è la sua essenza, non è però uno lo uso, ma vario secondo la varietà delle repubbliche, nelle quali quel che è vizio in una, nell'altre è virtù.¹²¹

Against Plato and Socrates, Speroni argues that the science of virtue is one, because one is the essence of virtue, while the *uses* of virtue are as many as the actual republics. In fact, what is considered a virtue in one republic might be a vice in another and vice-versa. Finally, Speroni asserts that the sophist actually has a peculiar superiority, consisting in a greater awareness of human limits in knowing the truth. The similitude proposed in the following passage is particularly explicative. The philosopher is like an idle young man who loves something he cannot reach, such as wisdom, just like suitors loved Penelope.

¹²¹ Ibid.

On the contrary, the sophist understands that he cannot reach the wisdom and is satisfied in having only the name of “wise.”

È da meno il filosofo che 'l sofista non è: perché il filosofo a guisa di giovane vano ama una cosa che non può mai ottenere, cioè la sapienza, come i Proci amavano Penelope. Ma il sofista, chiaro ormai di non potere essere sapiente, non si mette ad amare e desiderare la sapienza, che aver non può, ma senza superbia alcuna va alle ancille e si contenta di averne il nome.¹²²

The sophist accepts the fundamental weakness of the human means of knowledge and does not dream of a metaphysical sphere. The *trattatello* ends by proposing an equivalence between the sophist and the human condition: “sofista è imitatore, il quale non è niente e simiglia ogni cosa [...] sofista è lo esser nostro, perché non è e pare essere: non è, perché il presente dello essere è instante indivisibile, che fu piuttosto, e forse non sarà, che non è; e solo lo immortale è veramente.”¹²³

The sophist is presented as himself and, at the same time, as a metaphor for ephemeral human existence. This idea may certainly have several origins. One of these might be the contact with Attic tragedy through Gorgias' philosophy. As Mario Untersteiner suggested in the chapter on “tragic epistemology and ontology” of his book on ancient sophists, Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* and *On Not-being* or *On Nature* are the philosophical version of what Attic tragedy used to show on the stage: the changeable

¹²² Speroni. *Opere*. V. 432.

¹²³ Ibid.

and contradictory status of human life.¹²⁴ Gorgias' *Encomium* was translated to Latin by Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) and published by Aldo Manuzio in 1513, and a summary of Gorgias' *On Nature* was available in Sextus Empiricus' *Against Professors*, which was published in a Latin translation in 1569.¹²⁵ Therefore, either of the works might have inspired Speroni's idea of a natural inconsistency of human life.

2.3. *The condemnation of Socrates*

Speroni's *Contra Socrate* is a virtual trial leading for the second time to the condemnation of Plato's mentor and model. After considering the opinion of ancient sources, Speroni argues that Socrates conducted philosophical investigation the wrong way:

Si dice comunemente dalli antichi, cioè Platone, Senofonte, Cicerone, ed altri, [che Socrate] partito dalla contemplazione delle cose e cause naturali, come da cose a noi non pertinenti, si ridusse alle operazioni virtuose proprie nostre ed a considerare come in quelle avanzassimo. E io dico che ben ciò fece, ma fece male e male appresso gliene successe.¹²⁶

124 M. Untersteiner. *I sofisti*. Milano: Mondadori, 1996. 140.

125 For Bembo, see E. MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. Genève: Droz, 2011. 39. On Sextus Empiricus' work in the Renaissance, see L. Floridi. *Sextus Empiricus. The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002. 25-51; R. H. Popkin. *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle*. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 17-43.

126 Speroni. *Opere*. V. 418.

According to Speroni, Socrates, famous for the coherency of his habit and thought, was actually living in an enormous contradiction originating in his misunderstanding of the double meaning of virtue. Speroni clarifies once more that the essence of virtue, which is true and unique, is an object of philosophical contemplation completely different from civil virtue (“virtù civile”). What is virtue in one place is vice in another and the laws of a particular city are not accepted in a different city. Therefore, the perfect, absolute, true virtue does not exist on earth: “imperrocché questa vita civile è l'esser tale secondo le leggi, le quali sono varie secondo le varie forme delle repubbliche [...]. E però civilmente parlando, quello che qui è virtù, altrove è vizio, ove le prime leggi non sono accettate. Dunque qui non è vera, né assoluta, né perfetta virtù.”¹²⁷

Assuming that civil virtue and law are perfectly coincident, as Speroni suggests, Socrates confused the philosophical essence of virtue with civil virtue and tried to convince Athenians to follow the former while disregarding the laws of Athens. Eventually, he added a second contradiction when he refused to escape from jail, claiming his loyalty to the law:

Par dunque che Socrate, parlando in tal modo, ignorasse, come è in proverbio, la voce propria e se stesso, *et non constaret sibi ipsi*: ora è tutto legale e civile, ora è astratto e metafisico, distruente i sofisti, ma sofisticamente volgendosi alla città ed alle virtù civili e legali, or alla natura di esse virtù.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Ibid. 418.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 418-419.

Socrates' contradictory behavior was so strong that it affected his appearance. Speroni disregards the classical image of Socrates as a Silenus hiding a divinity, underlining instead how his physiognomy reflected his evil nature:

Queste cose dirai contra Socrate per li sofisti, e contra la maniera della sua vita da lui tenuta contra le leggi e costumi della sua patria, considerando lui esser stato naturalmente un mal uomo, come la sua fisionomia il mostrava, la quale si vede non essere stata regolata in lui dalla filosofia mondana e civile, che ciò non può stare, né dalla naturale, o soprannaturale, la quale fu disprezzata da lui.¹²⁹

Socrates abandoned the study of natural philosophy to concentrate on ethics and politics, but at the same time he refused to deal with the customs of his city. No longer a philosopher and refusing to be a rhetorician, he assumed a monstrous aspect: neither a man nor a god, but perhaps a beast. Speroni supposes that the judges of Athens may have acted unjustly, through ignorance or malice, but Socrates deserved the capital sentence in any case: “con questo può anche star che i giudici fossero ingiusti, quando alla morte il condannarono. Perciocché può essere che egli non meritasse la morte, ma che la morte li fusse data per invidia o per odio, non per ragione, non conoscendo i giudici la ragione veramente, per la quale era degno di morte.”¹³⁰ Speroni apparently did not agree with the Delphic Oracle, who declared Socrates the wisest of men, but he could approve of erecting a sculpture in honor of Gorgias at Delphi, as reported by Cicero's *De Oratore* (III, xxxii, 129).

¹²⁹ Ibid. 419.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 419.

3. *The Dialogo della retorica*

More than a century ago, the scholar Amelia Fano noted that Speroni's dialogues are Aristotelian in contents but Platonic in form.¹³¹ While scholars may disagree with the first part of this statement, they usually accept the second part. On the one hand Speroni rejects Platonic metaphysics and its results; on the other hand he adopts the Platonic dialogue as a valid form of literature. In the first part of his *Apologia*, Speroni acknowledges his debt to Plato and defines himself as an author of dialogues in the same way Plato did. Plato stated that everything in his dialogue is not his actual thought, and, in fact, some of Plato's characters praise injustice, condemn Socrates' ideas, and in general defend opinions opposite to those of Plato's:

Certo [Platone] non scema punto ma lascia intieri di tali materie quei suoi dialogi scandalosi, e con sue sole due parolette queta il rumore che ne può nascere, scrivendo in fine di una sua lettera che la dottrina, piena di liti e contenziosi, nei suoi dialogi dispensare non era sua opinione; e non ha uomo oggidì tutta la nostra religione, né ha avuto insin ora, che a tale scusa non sia contento. Dunque il romore che si suol fare delle materie e delle forme d'ogni dialogo in generale si può acquietar facilmente.¹³²

¹³¹ "aristotelici nella sostanza, platonici nella veste" (A. Fano. *Sperone Speroni. Saggio sulla vita e sulle opere*. Padova: Fratelli Drucker, 1909. 45).

¹³² Pozzi, ed. *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. 688.

In other words, according to Speroni, Plato invented a long-lasting argument in defense of any kind of dialogue no matter what content is presented. According to Mario Pozzi, the letter mentioned in this passage may be Plato's second letter, where the philosopher claims that Socrates – and not himself - says what he reports. This letter might suggest that Plato wanted to point out the difference between him as an author and his characters. The letter, however, does not discuss the truth of the contents of his shameful dialogues (“*dialogi scandalosi*”).

There is, in fact, an argument more effective than this in Plato's seventh letter - related to his unwritten doctrines (*agrapha dogmata*). The philosopher confesses that he does not trust language to express his philosophical views because linguistic means are weak, especially writing, which is unchangeable. Scholars have doubted the authenticity of the letter, but in the sixteenth century the authority on Platonism was Marsilio Ficino, who translated the letter and believed it to be an original work of Plato's.

There is also a further aspect of Speroni's process of writing that needs to be considered in reading his dialogues. As Jon Snyder highlighted, the mostly unfinished dialogues of Speroni are similar to and perhaps inspired by the first of Plato's dialogues, so-called aporetic because of their deeper focus on the process of reasoning rather than reaching a conclusion. The use of *aporia* – literally “lack of passage,” or better yet, “lack of conclusion” – in a dialogue allows one to overcome the rigidity that is hardly avoidable in a systematic treatise. Apparently, Speroni uses the aporetic form of dialogue against dogmatic Platonism - Plato against Plato, so to speak. This fact recalls the similar attitude that ancient skeptics had towards Platonism and suggests a possible connection

between Speroni and the skepticism circulating in the Venitian intellectual environment, as we will explore in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

The *Dialogo della retorica*, like several others, is unfinished and the author does not provide the reader with any final statement on the subject, never officially disclosing his judgment. Nonetheless, the conflict between rhetoric and Platonic philosophy is clearly a major matter of debate. Brocardo, one of the characters, clearly plays the role of mentor in defending the identity and vital function of rhetoric against his detractors, especially Plato. The attack on the Platonic position becomes explicit approaching the end of the work, when Brocardo mentions Plato's position on rhetoric. Although Plato is the virtual antagonistic character from the beginning of the work, Speroni chooses to reveal his name only towards the end, when the polemic against the detractors of rhetoric reaches its climax. But before going into the analysis of the last part of the work, it is necessary to briefly summarize the characters and plot of the *Dialogo*.

Gian Francesco Valerio and Marcantonio Soranzo, two Venetian gentlemen, and Antonio Brocardo, a Venetian author with a controversial intellectual relationship with Pietro Bembo, meet somewhere to discuss, in Soranzo's words, civil life which is a human being's main activity ("della vita civile, nostra umana professione").¹³³ The following definition provided by Soranzo places the subject between public life and poetry: "chiamo vita civile non solamente la bontà dei costumi col moralmente operare, ma il parlar bene a beneficio dell'avere, delle persone e dell'onore de' mortali; la qual

¹³³ Pozzi, ed. *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. 639. For a more detailed presentation of the characters, see Pozzi's introduction to the dialogue in (Ibid. 637-638).

cosa per avventura è virtù non men bella in sé stessa, o men giovevole alla umanità, della prudenzia e della giustizia.”¹³⁴

The topic is not related to any metaphysical subject, which is confirmed by Soranzo’s suggestion to skip the debate on the immortality of the soul held the same day in Gasparo Contarini’s house.¹³⁵ The three interlocutors agree that their dialogue will focus rather on rhetoric and oratory. Brocardo begins the discussion with an attempt to define the good orator in opposition with the philosopher: “E veramente quello è buono oratore, il qual, parlando d’alcuna cosa principalmente, non con la causa trattata, sì come fanno i filosofi, ma col l’arbitrio [...] e col piacere degli auditori tenta e procura di convenire.”¹³⁶ All the following debate is an explanation of this very first statement with arguments, figures of speech, and examples. One of the metaphors presented concerns a central point for our investigation. To make clear the hierarchy among the three types of oratory, epideictic, forensic, and deliberative - according to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* I - Brocardo applies the metaphor of the sunlight clearly taken from Plato’s *Republic* VII and imagines the epideictic oratory enlightening the other two types:

riflettendo i suoi raggi l’altre due più inferiori scalda e alluma mirabilmente. Quindi adivene che nelle cause iudiciali la iustizia e le leggi molte volte son laudate, e biasimato chi le perturba; e ne’ consigli delle republiche la libertà, la pace e la iusta guerra con somme laudi si essaltano, e i tiranni con vituperio son lacerati.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid. 639.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 639.

¹³⁶ Ibid. 642.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 658.

Epideictic oratory, which aims at praising or blaming someone or something, has a strong influence in all the spheres of public life, making this type of oratory superior and indispensable. Then a second metaphor is proposed to reinforce the previous one:

Finalmente l'arte e le cause oratorie a' sentimenti di nostra vita aguagliando, posso dire che le due prime sono il senso del tatto, senza le quali non nasceva, non vivrebbe l'orazione; ma la causa dimostrativa [*epideictic*], ornamento della retorica, è occhio e luce delle vita sua, lei a grado inalzando ove nulla dell'altre non è possente di pervenire.¹³⁸

Epideictic oratory is somehow present in the practice of the other two types of oratory, judicial and deliberative, and helps them in achieving their specific goals. Metaphorically speaking, the epideictic is the light that nourishes and guides the judicial and deliberative for achieving the best results. Speroni is suggesting a close relationship between epideictic oratory and political sphere, which is a crucial point for the rest of the dialogue.

Speroni dedicates the last part of the *Dialogo della retorica* to an extended monologue by Brocardo started at the request of Valerio who asks to be instructed on how to respond to the detractors of rhetoric:

¹³⁸ Ibid. 658.

Almeno m'insegnarete rispondere agli argomenti d'alcuni grandi i quali, confessando (quel che voi dite) la retorica essere arte la quale ne' nostri animi piacere e grazia partorisca, seguentemente non civile virtù ma perversa adulazione si fanno lecito di chiamarla e come vizio di mala guisa lei sbandiscono delle repubbliche.¹³⁹

Valerio is referring to Platonists (“alcuni grandi”) who wanted to banish rhetoric from the ideal republic considering it to be suspicious and harmful for political life. They argue that rhetoric is not civil virtue, but rather flattery. The keyword “civile” tightly connects this passage with the general purpose of the dialogue expressed at its beginning, where Soranzo decides that the public life (“vita civile”) and the oratory art (“parlar bene”) have to be the subject of the dialogue.

The entire excursus accomplished up to this point does not explicitly address Plato as the worst enemy of rhetoricians and now Valerio asks Brocardo to discuss him directly. Presenting this discussion, Speroni brings back the ancient *agon* between Platonic philosophy and sophistic rhetoric giving a vernacular version of it. This translation of a most classical conflict could reach a broad public, the middle class of the Venitian area, which was particularly interested in rhetorics' role in the life of a city. For this type of public, Speroni's dialogue could result much more usable and enjoyable than any other Latin work on the subject.

Brocardo's response to Valerio leaves no doubt about the reference to the ancient *agon*, for it mentions the major figures involved in the conflict. The passages refer to

¹³⁹ Ibid. 676.

Plato and his character Socrates arguing with Polus, Gorgias, Thrasymachus, and Glaucon: “Di Platone parlate, il quale in persona di Socrate, non per ver dire ma Polo e Gorgia tentando, con quello animo biasimò la retorica, che altra volta a Trasimaco e Glaucone fe’ laudar l’ingiustizia.”¹⁴⁰ Summarized here is the long-lasting war Plato waged - starting in one of his first dialogues, the *Gorgias*, and lasting until the masterpiece of his maturity, the *Republic*. Brocardo cannot accept Plato’s position and places himself on the side of the four sophists cited in the passage.

Furthermore, one of the most remarkable aspects of the passage quoted above, perhaps not immediately recognizable since it is enfolded in Speroni’s prose, is the implied definition of Plato as a sophist, which was already provided in a passage of *In difesa dei sofisti* (discussed in the first part of this chapter). In the passage from the *Dialogo della retorica*, in fact, Speroni argues that Plato used the character Socrates to provoke Gorgias and his pupil Polus without actually meaning a condemnation of rhetoric (“non per ver dire ma Polo e Gorgia tentando”) but rather emphasizing its power by eliciting a verbal competition. In other words, Socrates/Plato would have engaged the two rhetoricians in a rhetorical game, pretending to be against their art.

The final part of Brocardo’s speech aims at defending the role of both rhetoric and poetry in a political setting with three main arguments related to sophistry.

The first argument considers the changing role of rhetoric and poetry depending on social context and type of interlocutors. Brocardo compares rhetoric and poetry to different kinds of food available for different types of people and purposes. For philosophers these arts are not an essential vehicle of expression but rather an enjoyable

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 676.

means of relaxing after an engaging discussion on difficult topics, similar to fruit at the end of the dinner. For people who do not care about philosophical subjects, but who do care about the political life of the city and possess a role in it, speeches and verses are the main course of their meal:

se noi siamo filosofi, tali a noi sono la retorica e la poesia, quali i frutti alle tavole de' signori, li quali, dopo cena quando sono sazi, compiacendo al palato, alquanti per gentilezza ne mangiano [...] Al vulgo poi che non sa nulla, né fa pensier di sapere, e pure è parte della repubblica, l'orazioni e a le rime sono tutto il cibo e tutto 'l frutto della sua vita [...] Dunque io non vedo per qual cagion la retorica debba bandirsi delle repubbliche, sendo arte che ha per subietto le nostre umane operazioni, onde hanno origine le repubbliche.¹⁴¹

What Speroni calls “vulgo” is the Venetian middle class: traders and people working with material goods, that can build, maintain, and increase the wealth of their republic. This middle class is not an intellectual elite of ruler-philosophers and needs to be addressed in a proper way. In other words, the Platonic republic cannot be considered a model for Speroni's contemporary world, for the most productive social class does not understand and perhaps is not even interested in philosophy. On the contrary, it needs persuasive and enjoyable arguments provided by rhetoricians to gather social consensus on matters of general interest. An intrinsic pragmatism and a certain level of relativism lead Brocardo's speech to overcome the idea that ruling comes from a dimension above actual society and

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 677-678.

to assume that political and civil life originates from an agreement among people that share common interests. The anti-Platonic tone of Brocardo recalls the sophist Protagoras and his idea that ruling a state means to create as much consensus as possible to fulfill citizens' needs and serve the interest of the city, without any regards to any metaphysical truth. Orators craft and perform probable and uncertain arguments ("ragioni probabili e anzi incerte che no") as the best tools to employ in the public sphere.

The second argument to highlight in Brocardo's speech addresses the role of pleasure ("piacere") and delight ("dilettazione") in both rhetoric/oratory and poetry when they are used for political and civil purposes. Valerio already mentioned pleasure and gracefulness ("grazia") in his request to be instructed to reply to Plato's accusations against rhetoric. Brocardo now provides his argument pointing out that those feelings are major forces and capable of driving people towards issues of common interest. According to Brocardo, the philosopher is isolated and lives in solitude, whereas the orator is immersed in the public life and uses pleasure as a vehicle to convey his arguments. The orator's art is a mix of faith and demonstrative science, and his acts and words are intrinsically related to the city ("sono cose propriamente cittadinesche"). The citizens' delight ("dilettazione") arises from an orator's performance and he persuades them for his own glory as well as their wealth. Brocardo concludes his second argument with a comparison between citizens and animals who share the seeking of pleasure as their first goal and through satisfying their needs they accomplish higher ends. In fact, citizens develop the city, while animals increase the number of members of their species: "con la qual dilettazione persuadendo, a se' gloria e salute a' suoi cittadini suol generare l'oratore, non altramente che coi dilette carnali gli animali senza ragione generando l'un

l'altro facciano intera la loro specie.”¹⁴² Furthermore, it should be noted that Brocardo's reference to pleasure as the main motivation for action suggests an interesting intersection between Epicureanism and sophistry, both of them considered dangerous, although for different reasons.

The third argument to highlight in Brocardo's speech stems from his relativistic perspective. Indeed, Brocardo argues that if vices and virtues are different in different cities, then we should not rule the state relying on demonstrative sciences but rather on rhetoric and its changeable conclusions:

se una opra medesima, in vari tempi dalle leggi cittadinesche or vietata e or commendata, può esser vizio e virtù, ragione è bene che le nostre repubbliche non da scienze demonstrative, vere e certe per ogni tempo, ma con retoriche openioni variabili e tramutabili (quali sono l'opre e le leggi nostre) prudentemente sian governate.¹⁴³

For that very reason, the philosopher is unsuitable for ruling: “il filosofo [...] malamente può essere atto al governo della repubblica, le cui leggi per oneste cagioni avendo rispetto a' tempi, a' luoghi, alla utilità, alle sue leggi e all'altrui, spesse fiate da un dì all'altro mutano forma e sembianza.”¹⁴⁴

If human communities are changeable in space and time, then every ideal model is inappropriate and Speroni concludes his dialogue with an *encomium* of a new type of

¹⁴² Ibid. 679.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 678.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 679.

ruler. As the sophist Protagoras claimed, each human community is the measure of the world that the community itself crafts for its own interest. The coexistence of political realities based on different systems of values that aim to fulfill different needs cannot be avoided. In fact, that was the actual geopolitical context in which Speroni and his contemporaries lived. In this situation, according to Brocardo's speech, the rhetorician banished by Plato should replace the king-philosopher as the guide of republic.

Painting is one of the metaphors employed by Brocardo to discuss the rhetorical art and its effect and it is one of Speroni's favorite tropes in the *Dialogo della retorica* as well as in other works. As Florence Malhomme recently pointed out, the metaphor of the orator as a painter sheds light on important aspects of Speroni's concept of rhetorical art. Rhetoric and oratory produce images of the truth, verisimilitude instead of reality, and emotions that act like virtues but do not have any stability.¹⁴⁵

What Malhomme's analysis does not mention is that painting is also one of Plato's favorite tropes, although he gave it a mostly negative meaning. From the *Gorgias* (453c-454b) through the *Republic* to the *Sophist*, Plato aimed at delegitimizing rhetoric - comparing it to the art of crafting copies of the world, or, even worse, of creating illusions that substitute the real world.¹⁴⁶ On the contrary, Speroni employs the metaphor to support rhetoric. In fact, he exploits the potentiality of a Platonic figure of speech as the most efficacious weapon against Plato.

¹⁴⁵ See the so-called "paradigme pictural" in F. Malhomme. "La rhétorique et les arts chez Sperone Speroni." *Rhetoric* 29.2 (2011): 151-193. 157-62. The pictural trope is treated also in J.-L. Fournel. "Le 'portrait de la vérité' et la rhétorique vagabonde." *Discours littéraires et pratiques politiques*. Ed. A. C. Fiorato. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1987. 22-39.

¹⁴⁶ See E. C. Keuls. *Plato and the Greek painting*. Leiden: Brill, 1978.

While this chapter was dedicated to the defense of sophistry as a subject of discussion, the next chapter will examine the works of Speroni where sophistic rhetoric is not only a central topic, but is also performed in various ways.

Chapter III

Speroni's practice of sophistic rhetoric

Speech is a powerful lord, who with the finest and
most invisible body achieves the most divine works.

Gorgias of Leontini, *Encomium of Helen*

Speroni's literary production displays several examples of arguments, rhetorical strategies, and tropes that are variously related to ancient sophistry. The works that we are going to examine in this chapter show that Speroni was interested not only in recovering ancient sophists but also in experiencing a full exploitation of their art. The following pages are dedicated to the most representative works in these respects. Two types of texts are engaged. The first type uses the Protagorean double argument as a model of argumentation and, in fact, applies Protagoras' relativism and theory of the human being as a measure of all things. The second type is the so-called paradoxical dialogue, in particular the *Dialogo della Discordia* ("Dialogue on Discord") and *Dialogo della Usura* ("Dialogue on Usury"), which, I argue, draws on ancient sophistry as one of its main sources and encompasses discussion on major sophistic themes, such as the persuasive power of language and the use of the *encomium* to prove it. The practice of sophistry in these works is not a mere reproduction of the classics. Rather, it represents an original version of sophistic rhetoric in vernacular stemming from the profound

knowledge that Speroni had of the matter and from his literary brilliance. Ancient sophistry and its early modern version share one feature that made them suspicious: they challenge and undermine the bases of both Platonism and Aristotelianism. With his *trattatelli*, letters, and early dialogues, Speroni endorsed this challenge and provided some of the most enjoyable literature of the Renaissance.

1. *Antilogies*

The sophistic *Double Arguments* (*Dissoi Logoi*) are a collection of ancient texts by a single author who argues for and against several opinions. Most likely written in the second half of the fourth century B.C. by a rhetorician close to Protagoras' school, they concern a variety of topics. They explore the nature of opposite concepts, such as good and bad, fine and shameful, just and unjust, and true and false.¹⁴⁷ They were likely meant to be exercises for demonstrating how a skillful rhetorician is able to persuade his public of the validity and falsity of any opinion at the same time. The result of this practice is a new concept of truth and a substantial negation of the principle of non-contradiction, one of the three column on which Aristotle founded his logic.

Aristotle acknowledged the risk involved in practicing double arguments and rejected the Protagorean theory implied in them in his *Metaphysics* (IV 5, 1009a, 7-16; IV 4, 1007b, 18-23), saying that it would bring a general confusion on both the epistemological and ontological level and result in the impossibility of reaching any

¹⁴⁷ They are collected in J. Dillon and T. Gergel, eds. *The Greek Sophists*. London: Penguin Books, 2003. 318-333.

certainty. In other terms, Protagoras' antilogies, like other aspects and consequences of his thought, strongly support a skeptical position, which explains why Sextus Empiricus discusses Protagoras' perspective in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (I, 216-19) as well as in *Against the Mathematicians* (VII, 60-4).

Both Aristotle's attack and Sextus' interest make Speroni's practice of the antilogic method not only remarkable in itself but also for its distance from the Stagirite and its affinity with skepticism. After a survey of early modern editions, MacPhail argued that "the *Dissoi logoi* had one edition but not translation or commentary in the Renaissance." Indeed, the 1570 edition of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Philosophers* published by Henri Etienne includes the Greek *Dissoi logoi* without Latin translation.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps Speroni read the double arguments in the Greek edition, or he knew them through Aristotle and Sextus Empiricus. This first part of the chapter aims to present three different examples of double argument in Speroni's *oeuvre* to shed light on a significant part of his sophistic production.

The first example concerns the opposition of arguments on an inter-textual level. On the one hand, as we already saw, Speroni defends sophists and their rhetoric in his *trattatelli* entitled *In difesa dei sofisti* and *Contra Socrate*; on the other hand, as we will examine, he attacks them in his *Discorso dei lodatori* ("Speech about the Admirers"). Although Speroni does not provide a clear connection between the two opposite arguments, it is a matter of fact that he writes for and against the same subject. The second example is the *trattatello Della virtù* ("On Virtue") in which Speroni analyzes opposing definitions of virtue and considers different aspects of each argument. In this

¹⁴⁸ E. MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. Genève: Droz, 2011. 41.

case the author acts as a referee between opposite interpretations and at the same time offers his own solution. The third example concerns two letters to Alvise Cornaro and is the most explicit example of double argument in Speroni's *oeuvre*; their titles, *Contra la sobrietà* ("Against Moderation") and *Per la sobrietà* ("In Defense of Moderation"), the former against and the latter for moderation in life, clearly refers to a Protagorean model.

The following analysis of the three examples is more focused on Speroni's method of argumentation than on the topics treated in the texts, and more on forms than contents. The author's actual intention in writing these texts is not part of our investigation; we will rather focus on his rhetorical ability to argue any position.

1.1. *Against the sophists*

The *Discorso dei lodatori* ("Speech about the Admirers") is a short uncompleted text with no certain date. Speroni's speech attacks two categories of orators. The first includes those who praise unworthy things for the only purpose of demonstrating their superior cleverness and being praised as divine men:

E ciò fanno essi, come a me pare, perché si veda l'onnipotenza de' loro ingegni, e sopraumani sian giudicati: e non si avvengono, che in ciò facendo, essi vituperano se medesimi; avvegna che 'l ragionar di tai cose, non che 'l lodarle e magnificarle, sia gran vergogna di chi ne parla.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ S. Speroni. *Opere [...] tratte da' mss. Originali*. Eds. N. dalle Laste and M. Forcellini. 5 tomes. Venezia:

Although no name is explicitly stated, the description might fit Lucian of Samosata, the sophist, satirist, and rhetorician who wrote against common sense in a paradoxical fashion. One of the most famous of his works, *The Fly*, is an appreciation of what people usually consider a most annoying insect. According to Lucian, the fly is a noble and wise animal, full of virtues. Homer, for example, praised its courage. There is also evidence that its soul is immortal and can return to life. At the end Lucian declares that the list of fly's qualities is so long that he will not be able to conclude his praise. In fact, it is almost impossible to exhaust such a subject.¹⁵⁰

In his *Apologia dei dialoghi* I, Speroni condemns many of Lucian's dialogues as hateful ("odiosi").¹⁵¹ In the third part of the *Apologia*, he portrays the sophist Lucian as a devilish Epicurean:

Luciano sofista, uso a trattare in quei suoi dialoghi ed altri opuscoli così fatti nove menzogne di tutti i dei de' gentili, con loro inferni poetici e lor ridicoli paradisi, la guerra e pace di Faetonte e di Endimione, ed altre simili vanitadi; alla perfine [*sic*] perduto il senno e la fede di cristian battezzato, non già da scherzo in uno asino, ma in un diabolico epicureo si tramutò veramente.¹⁵²

Paradoxically, Speroni himself attempts to write two works close to Lucian's literary genre, the *Dialogo dell'Usura* and *Dialogo della Discordia*, in which usury and discord

Appresso D. Occhi, 1740. III. 405

¹⁵⁰ For Lucian's *The Fly*, see D. Marsh. *Lucian and the Latins. Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1998. 150-152.

¹⁵¹ M. Pozzi, ed. *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*. Tome II. Milano: Ricciardi, 1996. 721.

¹⁵² Speroni. *Opere*. I. 345.

defend themselves and their role in human and natural life; consequently, his attack in the *Discorso dei lodatori* is against a literary tradition to which Speroni himself partially belongs. Furthermore, in his *Apologia dei dialoghi* he describes his two dialogues on usury and discord as a pleasant practice, and proposes a list of classical works that have the same legitimate purpose, including Lucian's works: "è iscusabile al creder mio, chiunque legge ozioso, per sottrarsi da qualche noia, Terenzio, Plauto, Ovidio, Gallo, e li epigrammi di Marziale, di Luciano la vera istoria, la mosca."¹⁵³ Moreover, in the defense of his tragedy *Canace*, Speroni legitimizes the paradoxical works as rhetorical products with the ability to invert: "fo adonque anticamente lodato Busiri, la Musca e altre cose simili, e a' giorni nostri la discordia e l'usura; al che fare arte nessuna non è che ci dia ragione o precetti, anzi è solo l'arte di fare il contrario."¹⁵⁴ The two dialogues are more than a pleasant practice and represent two exemplary cases of sophistic rhetoric, as will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

The fact that the *Discorso dei lodatori* was composed at an uncertain date prevents a clear understanding of its relationship with other works. One can hypothesize that the author either changed his mind about the value of praising unworthy things or did not reveal his true intention in any of the works mentioned above. In either case, the result is an inter-textual double argument: on the one hand Speroni practices Lucian's literary genre and defends its legitimacy, on the other hand he condemns it as an evil practice.

¹⁵³ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 335.

¹⁵⁴ S. Speroni. *Canace e scritti in sua difesa*. Ed. Ch. Roaf. Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1982. 230. For a detailed analysis of this and similar passages in different Speroni's works of Speroni, see M. Pozzi. "Speroni e il genere epidittico." *Sperone Speroni*. Padova: Editoriale Programma, 1989.

The second category of orators that Speroni attacks in his *Discorso dei lodatori* concerns the sophist and is particularly striking for its contradiction with what we have read in the second chapter of this dissertation. One should blame sophists, Speroni says, because they perform speeches that do not prove almost anything:

Sono anche alcuni poco men vani de' sopradetti; li quali, mentre essi lodano qualche cosa, molto ne parlano, ma poco o nulla ne provano [...] essi parlano parte a guisa di adulatori, siccome sono, parte a guisa di ostentatori di una lor certa loquacità, perché eloquenzia sia riputata. E di questi cotali nell'una lingua e nell'altra molto abbonda la nostra età.¹⁵⁵

One may argue that Speroni implicitly makes a distinction between the ancient sophists, such as Gorgias and Protagoras, and the sophists of his age. Indeed, in his *Apologia dei dialoghi* as well as in other works, he praises the former and blames the latter. That argument would avoid a contradiction in Speroni's works but has to be rejected on the basis of the following passage from the *Discorso dei lodatori*:

Or non è dubbio, che questi tali son della schiera de' molto miseri ed infelici sofisti; i quali attendendo, siccome fan tuttavia, anzi a parere che ad essere, meritamente non uomini, ma ombre d'uomini dalli intendenti son riputati. Perciocché essi son quelli che il gran Platone in persona di quel buon Socrate, padre e maestro delle scienze e virtù, nei suoi divini dialogi or convincea

¹⁵⁵ Speroni. *Opere*. III. 405-406.

disputando, ed or schernendo ammirava, sempre ammonendo con gentil modo la sua repubblica, che da' costumi e dottrine loro non men dannose che vergognose, guardar dovesse i suoi cittadini. De' quali antichi sofisti quasi ombra d'ombra, ora a di nostro il rimane ancora qualche sembianza; e sono costoro di cui pur dianzi si ragionava.¹⁵⁶

According to this passage, the first category of orators, which includes Lucian of Samosata, would be an unworthy copy of the second category, the great sophists mentioned in Plato's dialogue. Nevertheless, Speroni condemns both categories and praises the great ("gran") Plato and his mentor Socrates, father of all virtues, who blamed the sophists and urged the city to forbid their teaching. If the passage above were anonymous, one would say that the writer definitely is a Platonist, Marsilio Ficino, for example, rather than the author of the works *In difesa dei sofisti* and *Contra Socrate*. Indeed, it is striking how the same author could write in praise of sophistry against Plato and Socrates and then blame the sophists as enemies of Platonism.

In the passage above, Speroni acts as a Platonist even in the terms and tropes that he employs. The attack begins with the classical opposition between appearance, connected to ignorance, and the real world. It continues with the representation of the ancient sophists as shadows and modern sophists as a darker duplication of them ("quasi ombra d'ombra"). Two parts of Plato's *Republic* may have inspired this figure of speech: the myth of the cave (in book VII) where the prisoners are obliged to look at the shadows projected on the wall at the bottom of the cave, while they think this projection is the real

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 406.

world; and the critique of the mimetic arts (in book X), which are considered useless activity aiming to create a copy of what already is a copy of an eternal form.

The fact that Speroni dedicates a longer and more articulated discourse in defending the sophists in his two *trattatelli*, than in condemning them in the *Discorso dei lodatori*, may suggest that his real intention is to defend them. The dialogue in cardinal Amulio's house in the *Apologia dei dialoghi* and Brocardo speech in the *Dialogo della retorica* - both of them examined in the second chapter – suggest the same interpretation. Nevertheless, Speroni does not resolve the contradiction between those works and the *Discorso dei lodatori* and stands as an author of opposing discourses. This is exactly the goal of the double argument that leaves the reader confused about the possibility of finding the truth. Arguing against sophists after his defense of them, Speroni actually creates a unique example of antilogy.

1.2. *What is virtue?*

The second example to analyze reveals other aspects of Speroni's rhetoric. Like his other *trattatelli*, *Della virtù* ("On virtue") was probably conceived as a private note or first draft for a future dialogue or speech to present in an Accademia or to a broader public. On the one hand, this makes the text difficult to interpret and summarize. On the other hand, the reader has the opportunity to explore Speroni's speechwriting technique. Metaphorically speaking, we can access Speroni's *scriptorium*, his "place for writing," to observe him at work. The draft version that we are going to examine, the only one

currently available, allows us to look at the steps of Speroni's reasoning in building his text. From this draft, one can illustrate how Speroni writes as a rhetorician looking for the most persuasive way to present an issue. Moreover, one sees how a double argument may be employed in the process of writing.

Della virtù is essentially a sequence of differing opinions on what constitutes virtue. Speroni proceeds by presenting each opinion, considering its aspects and whether it is true or false.

The first opinion states that virtue is a natural product: "Alcuni credono che la virtù sia natura, cioè che l'uomo della tale complessione sia di tal virtù, e dell'altra, dell'altra; come anche il tale animale bruto per sua natura è di tale virtù e vizio. Questa opinione puo' essere bona o cattiva."¹⁵⁷ Speroni then presents both sides of the argument, showing how it is possible to defend and attack the validity of this position at the same time. At the end of his analysis, Speroni reveals to the reader that this opinion is partially true and partially false ("è dunque parte vera, parte falsa cotale opinione").¹⁵⁸ It is possible either to defend or attack it, and the choice does not depend on the truthfulness of the position, but rather on the intention of the rhetorician who chooses the aim of his speech. The author also writes personal notes addressed to himself, which demonstrate the major steps of his reasoning.

The second opinion examined by Speroni opposes the first one (virtue is natural) and states that virtue can be acquired only by a long practice of virtuous acts: "la seconda opinione si è che la virtù sia usanza e consuetudine acquistata con un longo esercizio, e di qui proviene il nome di costume, e quel che comunemente si dice, *habitus fit ex*

¹⁵⁷ Speroni. *Opere*. III. 391.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 391.

frequentatis actibus".¹⁵⁹ The author, then, applies the same pattern of argumentation, like a rhetorical refrain, showing that this second opinion may be considered partially valid: "questa ancora è in parte buona in parte cattiva. È cattiva se si crede che in ciò solo consista la perfezion dell'abito virtuoso, è bona, se si vuol dire che ciò aiuti a far perfectio l'abito virtuoso".¹⁶⁰ Like for the first opinion, the rhetorician does not endeavor to discuss truthfulness, but rather the possibility of persuading the reader of different things by applying different arguments. As he did for the first opinion, Speroni takes note of the main steps of his reasoning and then, when he apparently finds a potentially convincing example, he writes that he should keep it in mind for employment at the most appropriate moment. In fact, it makes sense that he was writing a draft for a possible speech on the nature of virtue to perform in public.

The third opinion presented in *Della virtù* is that virtue is the possession of knowledge. Through the way in which Speroni presents this option, one can understand that this is his personal contribution on the subject which marks the distance between his personal thought and the philosophical tradition. For a while, Speroni acts more as a philosopher than as a rhetorician and argue against Aristotle regarding the nature of virtue:

Or veggiamo come questo abito della virtù scientifico si generi in noi. E dico che si genera per ragion dimostrativa e per ragion probabile. Probabile e superficiale è tutto quello che delle virtù dice Aristotele; perché non lo dice e prova per le ragioni delle virtù. Ma noi parleremo delle scienza della virtù acquistata per la sua

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 391-392.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 392.

causa dimostrativa, la qual causa è la natura. E questo mostreremo in noi stessi senza altri libri della *Etica*. Perché noi stessi saremo il libro, ove impareremo che cosa è virtù in sé e nelle sue specie particolari, senza leggere li altri autori.¹⁶¹

If we were unfamiliar with the author and context of this paragraph, we might identify it as the introduction of an anti-Aristotelian treatise on ethics. Aristotle's arguments on virtue are accused of being superficial, weak, and supported by no proof. It is a pity that Speroni did not complete this work, for it would have been of great interest, for the history of the Italian literature as well as the history of philosophy, to read the final version of such a refutation of Aristotle's *Ethics* in vernacular language by a well-known Aristotelian. At least one can appreciate the original metaphor of the self as the book that one should trust the most to acquire virtue.

The fourth opinion on what is virtue is provided by Plato and Socrates. According to Speroni, this may also be considered from two opposing points of view, such that this opinion would be erroneous for some reasons and correct for others. As he did with the previous opinions, Speroni follows the antilogic pattern of arguing on the both sides of the issue and shows his ability to create double speeches opposing the different perspectives of the philosophical tradition.

1.3. *Condemning and praising moderation*

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 394.

The third example of opposing arguments is clearly expressed in the title of the two texts *Contra la sobrietà* and *Per la sobrietà* which are strictly connected. Both are dedicated to “Messer” Luigi (Alvise) Cornaro, who was popular for his sober life and wrote the treatise *Della vita sobria* published in Padua in 1558 and republished several times.¹⁶² His letter to Speroni dated April 1547 helps to clarify the reason for the composition of Speroni’s two opposing discourses.¹⁶³ In his letter Cornaro states that his moderation in life has made him immortal (“lo ordine ha fatto me immortale”) and evidence of this is his surviving the pain of the death of his friends, especially Ruzzante (Angelo Beolco, 1502-1542), a popular actor close to Cornaro as well as to Speroni. He continues by praising the results of a moderate life and defines his as the happiest possible. There is just one thing that threatens his perfect state: the death of friends caused by lack of moderation. Thus, he asks Speroni to convince their common friends to embrace a regular and sober life.

Speroni’s first response to Cornaro’s request is his letter *Contra la sobrietà* which begins by referring to Cornaro’s letter:

La vostra lettera mi è favore, perché è segno che amorevolmente vi ricordate di me, e che amate la vita mia: e mi è anche di gran disfavore, quando per lei si vede, che io faccio cosa, che mi è di danno e vergogna, e perciò me ne riprendete. Dunque io vi ringrazio parte, e parte devo iscusarmi, e se non posso o non voglio con lo ammendarmi, almeno con le parole; acciò non paia che con la mia vita non

¹⁶² For a critical edition of the text and related letters with an historical introduction, see A. Cornaro. *Scritti sulla vita sobria. Elogio e lettere*. Ed. M. Milani. Venezia: Corbo e Fiore editori, 1983. A further study on Cornaro and his work, and the friendship with Speroni, is in E. Lippi. *Cornariana. Studi su Alvise Cornaro*. Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1983. 1-47.

¹⁶³ The letter is published in Cornaro. *Scritti sulla vita sobria. Elogio e lettere*. 141-143.

sobria, nella quale ho tanti compagni, anzi signori, manchi di difensore, poiche'
ella manca di laude.¹⁶⁴

The style of the double-speech performance is announced in this very beginning. Indeed, Speroni claims to be happy and sad at the same time in receiving Cornaro's letter. He welcomes Cornaro's letter as evidence of their friendship and declares it as the cause of his treatise against Cornaro's argument on moderation. The above passage reflects these contradictory feelings with two oppositions of coupled terms ("favore [...] disfavore", "vi ringrazio parte [...] parte devo iscusarmi"). Finally, Speroni expresses his need to defend his disorderly life by praising immoderation, which is in fact accomplished by condemning the life of moderation.

Speroni's attack on sober living is introduced by a mythological allegory. When Pluto and the three Parcae complained about Aesculapius' power to resurrect dead men, Jove struck Aesculapius with lightning because he was reversing the natural order. This myth shows that Cornaro's dream of an immortal life runs against the divine rules. Several arguments follow to destroy possible defenses of the sober life. Among the most interesting is the idea that moderation – now personified – would be constantly focused on diet and thus would destroy any other virtue, above all the soldiers' fortitude as well as advisors' wisdom:

che se la vita sobria comanda che si mangi tanto, e non più né manco, e di tai
cose, ed a tal ora, e non più tardi o più per tempo; non bisogna dunque mai

¹⁶⁴ Speroni. *Opere*. III. 414. A defective copy transcribed by Girolamo Cornaro, a author's relative, is published in Cornaro. *Scritti sulla vita sobria. Elogio e lettere*. 205-212.

digiunare, né mai far cosa che possa interromper questo ordine, né studiare, né camminare, né combattere per la patria; perché ciò facendo si interrompe l'ordine dei cibi e qualità di essi, e il tempo del suo mangiare [...]. E la vita sobria non pensa ad altro che al suo mangiare [...] bella cosa saria al tempo di consigliare e combattere per la patria veder il savio far la sua colazione.¹⁶⁵

The ironic tone conveys an efficacious argument: a perfectly moderate habit requires so much attention to one's own private life that to focus on any other activity would be impossible, in turn resulting in general negligence towards public duties. This argument is reinforced by recalling philosophical authorities:

La sanità secondo i buoni filosofi è gran bene, ma non però il sommo, né il dolore è il peggior male che si abbia. Maggior mal è il mancare del debito suo verso gli amici, li posterì, la patria: alli quali si manca di necessità, se il viver lungamente in sanità è il fine nostro.¹⁶⁶

Further arguments against moderation are based on medicine, natural philosophy, moral habits, and personal experience. The final part of the text restates the authentic affection of Speroni for Cornaro, but above all proposes to embrace the relativity of any perspective and to accept the impossibility of defining any stable value for moderation:

¹⁶⁵ Speroni, *Opere*. III. 416.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 417.

“Dio [...] conservi vostra magnificenza, e me, e chi ne ama, ciascuno col suo ordine o disordine di vivere: che io ho il vostro per più disordine, che non avete voi il mio.”¹⁶⁷

The reader convinced by the attack *Contra la sobrietà* would be disoriented by the opposite speech in Speroni's letter *Per la sobrietà*, which is designed to endorse a moderate life habits. The author's conversion towards Cornaro's opinion is introduced by a comparison with a classical example that is a powerful first step to persuade the reader:

Leggesi che Stesicoro poeta antico ciciliano, poich  in certi suoi versi disse male di Elena figliuola di Giove, divenne cieco: ma pentendosi poscia di averne mal favellato, e scrivendo in contrario, ricover  la veduta. Or se ci  avvenne a costui per dir male, e ridir bene di una donna, bella certo, ma cagione per la sua bellezza di tante morti e di troiani, e di greci, e di sciti, e di etiopi con la roina di un s  gran regno, non debbo io credere, che similmente mi avvenga?¹⁶⁸

The rhetorical device already used in *Contra la sobriet * is now applied with the opposite purpose of praising moderation as a virtue. Indeed, in both texts Speroni recalls a mythological anecdote to introduce his argument and give his advice. The two pairs of characters (Aesculapius-Cornaro in the argument against moderation and Stesicoro-Speroni in the opposite argument) share the same pattern: the latter character should imitate the former as a model. Furthermore, in both the cases the myth highlights an aspect of divine order and is a source of inspiration to follow the right behavior.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 420.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 421.

Plato is among the most popular sources that could have inspired the passage above. Indeed, Speroni could perhaps have read about the story of the ancient Sicilian poet Stesichorus in the dialogue *Phaedrus* (243a), where Socrates, at the end of his speech and competing with the rhetorician Lysias, tells Phaedrus that he intends now to propose a true speech about Eros, since he feels guilty for having acted as a sophistic rhetorician and wants to expiate his sin. To explain his case, Socrates compares himself to Stesichorus who was punished with blindness for having composed a speech against Helen of Troy and recovered by composing a *Palinode*.

As the lyric poet and Socrates did, Speroni intends to praise what he previously condemned since, unlike Stesichorus, he has already regained the sight – in his case the intellectual instead of the physical – before composing the palinode rather than after:

Dissine male [della sobrietà], e se cieco non ne divenni, come colui [i.e. Stesicoro], certo in dicendone male io era cieco peggio di lui; perciocché io era cieco dell'intelletto, non conoscendo quanto io peccassi in scriver lettera così cattiva: ed ora non senza grazia di Dio credo esser mosso a disdirmi; e credo che non come Stesicoro dopo il fatto, ma innanzi tratto sia guarito e racquistato il buon lume della ragione. Perciocché non solamente vedo il mio errore, ma veggio chiaro tutte le laudi di questa rara virtù.¹⁶⁹

The palinode that follows, based on argumentation and citations of authorities, is unfinished. The last sentence presents a similarity between the sober eater and angels:

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

“chi poco mangia, è prossimo agli angioli, che nulla mangiano; al diavol no, il quale devora il peccatore, *et semper quaerit quem devoret*. Peccò ...”¹⁷⁰ The comparison to Satan devouring sinners’ souls, which could evoke in a reader’s imagination one of the most popular and terrifying scenes of Dante’s *Inferno* (34, vv. 55-60), gives a clear moral and religious connotation to the two opposite habits.

The palinode is shorter and less articulated than the accusation, a weak and uncompleted eulogy (“un fiacco panegirico, non per niente incompiuto”) – as Emilio Lippi described it.¹⁷¹ Given that praise of moderation and temperance had been such a popular topic in medical, philosophical, and religious literature from Antiquity to the *De vita libri tres* of Marsilio Ficino, both in Pagan and Christian literature, Speroni might have thought his palinode would have appeared redundant, or a rhetorical performance too facile to attract the reader’s attention and not challenging enough for the author.

On the contrary, the speech *Contra la sobrietà* was one of the most difficult arguments to present and needed to be thoughtfully designed. Speroni is aware that an orator is assessed by his public. One can imagine his pride, as a rhetorician, in designing the first speech ever written in Western culture against the virtue that had always been praised as a principle of health for body and soul. Speroni is competing with the classical models that he knew and quoted in his works, including Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* and Lucian’s *The Fly*, but the difficulty of his rhetorical work increases remarkably because of the topic, for Speroni is not dealing with superficial subjects, like Lucian’s fly, nor with mythological figures, like Gorgias’ Helen. In his *Contra la sobrietà* Speroni is

¹⁷⁰ Speroni. *Opere*. III. 424.

¹⁷¹ Lippi. *Cornariana. Studi su Alvise Cornaro*. 37.

condemning a virtue that was not supposed to be attacked and praising the vice that no author would publically defend.

The summaries of the texts (*Summario contra la vita sobria* and *Summario per la vita sobria*), found in a manuscript of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice and published by Lippi, allow us to look at the process of Speroni's writing from a tentative list of notes through the last version of the works.¹⁷² Furthermore, we can appreciate the presence in the summaries of aphorisms, tropes, and examples that the author decided to omit from the final version for unknown reasons. Particularly interesting in the first summary are the arguments against common sense: "troppo desiderate di vivere, et in ciò non siete sobrio"; "La gioventù, nemica della sobrietà, è bella, non già la vecchiezza"; "la sobrietà è simile alla età aurea che fu goffa, et sotto Saturno, mal Dio, non così Giove".¹⁷³

The structure of the two summaries allows the reader to easily perceive the opposition between arguments. The clearest and most sophistic example of rhetoric doubled across the two texts is how Speroni deploys the idea of measurement. In the summary against moderation Speroni describes the theoretical monotony of an impossible fixed position of the sun in Libra, comparing it to the obsessive act of measuring. He imagines Cornaro as the luminary persisting in the same celestial position for the entire year in order to show his paradoxical habit:

rare volte si deve adoperare la libra, però una sol volta vi va il sole; se foste il sole, sempre sareste in libra, sempre li giorni sariano pari, sempre egualmente caldo et freddo: guai al mondo se eravate sole, come hora sete in questa vita. O

¹⁷² The two summaries are published in Lippi. *Cornariana. Studi su Alvise Cornaro*. 39-44.

¹⁷³ Ibid. 37-41.

misero colui che i giorni conta, et voi contate le hore! Altri non pesano i ducati, et voi li becci et li quattrini et li bagatini.¹⁷⁴

In the summary in support of moderation Speroni argues in the opposite sense:

Pesiamo le monete per non essere ingannati nella roba; perché non pesar quel che mangiamo, per non c'ingannar noi stessi nella vita? Compriamo a peso le cose, e le mangiamo a discrettione? Il peso, il numero e la misura sono cose utilissime alla humanità, come si vede, et per mostrar la eccellenza sua si dà il pesar fin alle anime da San Michele.¹⁷⁵

The first passage points out the opposition between the practice of moderation and natural life, and stresses the strangeness of Cornaro's habit. The second passage inverts the argument and proposes measurement as the supreme principle that rules the mankind in life and afterlife, with a biblical and iconographic reference to Saint Michael's weighing of souls on Judgment Day.

The texts *Contra la sobrietà* and *Per la sobrietà* as well as their summaries are opposing arguments representing a most relevant example of *antilogia* in the vernacular literature of the Renaissance. The speech against moderation and its summary are also particularly interesting in themselves as an attempt to invert common sense and convince the reader that what is universally considered a virtue is actually a vice. In Aristotle's

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 40.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 42.

words, Speroni aims at “making the weaker argument stronger” (*Rhetoric* 1402a) combining the rhetoric of Protagoras and Gorgias.

2. *Rhetoric in dialogues*

The dialogues and writings on the theory of dialogue are the most studied part of Speroni’s *oeuvre*. Evidence of this can be found in the large number of international scholarly contributions on the subject and modern editions of dialogues as compared to the attention given to other parts and aspects of Speroni’s works. However, the *Dialogo della Discordia* and *Dialogo dell’Usura*, published with the other dialogues in 1542 by Daniele Barbaro and then republished several times in the sixteenth century, have attracted less attention than some of the others.¹⁷⁶ The summary with extended quotes given by Francesco Cammarosano, almost a century ago, although useful for an initial study, does not investigate the meaning, relevance, or sources of the dialogues.¹⁷⁷ Since then, uncertainty about the nature and final goal of the dialogues has most likely discouraged scholars from deepening their study and has led to a scholarly focus directed more toward Speroni’s intentions as a writer and his authorship. This particular attention has resulted in interesting interpretations but has not resulted in any consistent result because of Speroni’s contradictory statements.

¹⁷⁶ The dialogues were published in 1543, 1544 (1545), 1546, 1550, 1552, 1558, 1560, 1564, 1596 and finally in 1740.

¹⁷⁷ See F. Cammarosano. *La vita e le opere di Sperone Speroni*, Empoli: Tipografia R. Nocchioli, 1920. 35-38 (on *Dialogo dell’Usura*); 85-90 (on *Dialogo della Discordia*).

A brief survey of scholarly remarks will give the reader a general idea of the tendencies of the most recent research and of the tangled issue of identifying Speroni's actual intentions. In his contribution published in 1989, after having collected several quotes from different Speroni's works, Mario Pozzi was surprised that in some of them the author considered his two dialogues among the most precious he ever wrote because they were conceived as a pure exercise of rhetoric.¹⁷⁸ In contrast, John Snyder, in both his essays published in 1989, argued that in the *Apologia dei dialoghi*, Speroni strategically masked his real intention in condemning his dialogues as being an error of his youth, and that Speroni's self accusation should be read as a rhetorical device to avoid condemnation by the Inquisition.¹⁷⁹ One year later, in his monograph on Speroni, Jean-Louis Fournel noticed the contradiction between what the author repeatedly stated about the ancient authors, who had inspired him in composing his paradoxical dialogues, and the actual intention of those authors. In fact, Fournel argues, on the one hand Speroni compared his dialogues on discord and usury with the praise of Busiris by Isocrates and the appreciation of the fly by Lucian, considering all of them as a literary joke. On the other hand, there is no evidence to suggest that Isocrates and Lucian considered their own works a pure joke, a contradiction of which Speroni should have been aware.¹⁸⁰ Finally, in her 1992 monograph on the Renaissance dialogue, Virginia Cox noticed that Speroni rejected his dialogue on usury not only in his *Apologia* but also in his private epistolary –

¹⁷⁸ M. Pozzi. "Speroni e il genere epidittico." *Sperone Speroni*. Padova: Editoriale Programma, 1989. 85: "Risulta dunque, non senza qualche sorpresa, che lo Speroni considera l'*Usura* e la *Discordia* le gemme più mirabili dei dialoghi giovanili, quelli in cui la virtù retorica opera in tutta la sua purezza."

¹⁷⁹ J. R. Snyder. "La maschera dialogica: la teoria del dialogo di Sperone Speroni." *Sperone Speroni*. 117: "L'*Apologia* è la messa in scena di una serie di strategie di difesa." See also J. R. Snyder. *Writing the Scene of Speaking: Theories of Dialogue in the late Italian Renaissance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989. Chapter 3.

¹⁸⁰ J.-L. Fournel. *Les dialogues de Sperone Speroni: liberté de la parole et règles de l'écriture*. Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1990. 74.

which may be considered evidence against Snyder's interpretation – while Gambattista Gelli, one of the first interpreters of the dialogue, read it as an actual defense of usury, perhaps reflecting the actual intention of Speroni.¹⁸¹ All the significant studies mentioned above are based on textual evidence but they do not give the same results, which proves that any of these pieces of evidence can ultimately prevail over the others. The only common result that these studies definitely share is an observation of Speroni's contradictory authorship, or at least his tendency to confuse the reader about his actual intention. Indeed, even the label "paradoxical dialogues" is problematic, at least for the *Dialogo della Discordia*, as in his *trattatello* entitled *Della pace*, a serious draft for a political treatise, Speroni also argues supporting discord as an essential force for natural and human life.¹⁸²

The uncertainty about Speroni's intention as an author may be frustrating and invites a shift in method and direction of investigation in studying the two dialogues on discord and usury. The following analysis does not aim anymore to understand Speroni's actual intention, and the question "why?" will be replaced with "what?" What is actually expressed in the texts? In other words, it is possible to restart a productive investigation by changing the perspective of observation. It is necessary to leave aside the author's statements on his works and directly explore their rhetorical aspects and sources. Furthermore, when an *aporia* does not allow a clear understanding of the author's purpose, it is highly possible one is dealing with a sophistic product. Ambiguity, contradiction, and deceiving are, indeed, part of sophists' procedures in writing. A major

¹⁸¹ V. Cox. *The Renaissance dialogue: literary dialogue in its social and political contexts, to Galileo*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 75. The letter is published in M. Pozzi and M. R. Loi. "Le lettere familiari di Sperone Speroni." *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 163 (1986): 386-387.

¹⁸² Speroni. *Opere*. V. 437.

example is Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, where the purpose declared at the beginning seems serious: "I wish to free the accused from blame, and, revealing her detractors as liars and showing forth the truth, to free her from ignorance," whereas the closure somehow suggests the opposite: "my purpose was to compose a speech as an encomium of Helen and an amusement for myself," which makes it difficult to establish the actual intention of Gorgias, who leaves the reader confused about his aims.¹⁸³

2.1. Dialogo della Discordia

In the *Dialogo della Discordia*, the goddess Discordia defends her role in the human world against Jove's charges, performing rhetorical speeches and engaging in dialogues with Jove to justify her role in human life and affairs. Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* might have been a source of inspiration for Speroni's work. Like Discordia, Folly defends herself against the accusations struck by her delegators and sophistry certainly has a major role in Erasmus' work.¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Speroni's dialogue keeps its own originality, as we will see in the following analyzes of the text. Furthermore, a substantial difference between the two works is the language: Speroni wrote his *Dialogo* in vernacular as an attempt to create a modern version of a classical genre for a larger public.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Dillon and T. Gergel, eds. *The Greek Sophists*. 77 and 84.

¹⁸⁴ MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. 112-117.

¹⁸⁵ See the introduction of D. Erasmus. *The Praise of Folly*. Ed. C.H. Miller. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

One has to go back to the early ancient Greek literature to find discord considered as a positive force. This is the case of Heraclitus' idea of *polemos* as the origin of everything and a fundamental force allowing the continuity of life.¹⁸⁶ Except for Heraclitus and a few other authors, the Greek goddesses Enyo and Eris as well as the Latin Discordia had usually been negative figures in literature, and neither an encomium nor a praise of them has reached us either as a work or as a reference. This makes Speroni's dialogue a unique work with regard to the topic. In this sense the *Dialogo della Discordia* may be considered a case similar to his letter *Contra la sobrietà* – that we examined above – but in the opposite sense, for in the latter he argues against the queen of virtues, while in the former he praises what has been considered the personification of any natural and human destructiveness. The fact that the *Dialogo della Discordia* ends without any final verdict pronounced by Jove as a judge does not nullify the several arguments presented within the work. On the contrary, one may speculate that the conclusion of the dialogue, characterized by increasing conflict, is actually the final victory of the goddess. In either case, the following close reading does not speculate about the real winner in the *Dialogo*, but rather explores the rhetorical techniques displayed in the text, the ongoing discussion on the relativity of any argument, and the connection with sophistry in several regards.¹⁸⁷

The *Dialogo* begins with Discordia complaining about her bad reputation among

¹⁸⁶ See Heraclitus of Ephesus' fragments: "It is necessary to realize that war is common, and strife is justice, and that everything happens in accordance with strife and necessity." "War is father of all and king of all. Some he reveals has gods, others as men; some he makes slaves, others free" in R. Waterfield, ed. *The First Philosophers. The Presocratics and the Sophists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 40 (F22, F23).

¹⁸⁷ A brief attempt to explore the role of sophistry in the dialogue is in R. Buranello. "The Identity of Discord: The Paradoxical Discourse of Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo della discordia*." *Studi d'italianistica nell'Africa australe* 12.2 (1999): 58-74. 73-74.

humans and gods: “parti Giove, che io, la quale produssi e conservo il mondo, degna sia di dover essere biasimanta e bestemmiata da ciascheduno?”¹⁸⁸ She claims to be the mother of the gods and to have permitted the rise of Jove’s power in universe through his conflict with Kronos: “Ricordati almeno d’aver avuto da me la signoria che tu tieni: con ciò sia cosa che la discordia, che fu tra te e tuo padre, ti fe’ signore dell’universo.”¹⁸⁹ Therefore, she asks Jove for an act of justice to give her the honor she deserves.

At the beginning Jove is not willing to listen to Discordia’s arguments, fearing that somebody might see him talking with her, which would be considered inappropriate. After Discordia accepts to wear Ganymede’s clothes in order to hide her identity, Jove invites her to present her arguments: “parla e dimmi sicuramente le tue ragioni.”¹⁹⁰ She begins to speak in order to move the king of gods by showing him her miserable state:

Io parlerò Giove, a fine di farti pietoso alla mia miseria; non con animo d’esser lodata come eloquente. Muova il dolor la mia lingua, parta e dispona a suo modo le mie parole; e quale io il sento nel core, tale a te vegna agli orecchi: che senza essere altramente artificiosa ed ornata, assai ti persuaderà l’orazion mia a dolerti di me.¹⁹¹

If Jove plays here the role of judge, then Discordia is breaking one of the first rules given by Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, specifically that “speakers ought not to distract the judge by driving him to anger, envy or compassion” because “that would be rather as if one were

¹⁸⁸ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 133.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. I. 133.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. I. 136-137.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. I. 137.

deliberately to make crooked a ruler that one was intending to use.” (1354a)¹⁹²

Rather than the Stagirite, she seems to follow what Gorgias theorized in the third argument of his *Encomium of Helen*, where he explains how powerfully a well-crafted speech can affect the human soul: “speech is a powerful lord, who with the finest and most invisible body achieves the most divine works: it can stop fear and banish grief and can create joy and nurture pity.”¹⁹³ Gorgias’ *Encomium* was translated into Latin by Pietro Bembo and published by Aldo Manuzio in 1513 in a collection of works by ancient rhetoricians and orators.¹⁹⁴ Given Speroni’s interest in the art of rhetoric and practice of oratory and his consideration of Bembo as a mentor in those fields, it would not surprise if Gorgias’s words inspired Discordia’s *incipit*.

In any case, Discordia declares that she is going to perform a short speech without any unnecessary elements to prove what she has stated from the beginning: “ogni mia operazione esser buona da sé.”¹⁹⁵ But rather than an oration, Discordia engages in a dialogue with Jove, in which she conducts the reasoning and the god confirms the correctness of the discourse, in the way Plato often presents his dialogues, where Socrates leads and the other characters follow his verbal stream. The climax of this similarity comes when Discordia deploys a maieutic approach posing questions to Jove:¹⁹⁶

Disc. Ora saltiamo, come se Teti, di cielo a basso, e discorriamo con lo intelletto

¹⁹² Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Ed. H. Lawson-Tancred. Penguin Books: London, 1991. 67.

¹⁹³ *The Greek Sophist*, 79.

¹⁹⁴ P. Bembo. *Gorgiae Leontini in Helenam laudatio*. Ed. F. Donadi. Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 1983. E. MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. 39.

¹⁹⁵ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 137.

¹⁹⁶ Pozzi briefly notes “un fitto dialogo ‘socratico’ e battute molto vivaci” in his “Nota introduttiva.” *Trattatelli del Cinquecento*. 499. This aspect of the dialogue is mentioned in R. Buranello, “The Identity of Discord: The Paradoxical Discourse of Sperone Speroni’s *Dialogo della discordia*.” *Studi d’italianistica nell’Africa australe* 12.2 (1999): 58-74: 68 and 72.

per tutte quante le parti del mondo mortale, le quali (parlo le principali) quattro sono e non più: quelle come stanno di compagnia? *Gio.* In quella guisa che l'acqua si può dir compagna al fuoco, e l'aere della terra che sono contrari. *Disc.* Dimmi Giove, come produsse queste cose la nostra madre natura? *Giov.* Come conserva, così produsse. *Disc.* Or non conserva con lite? *Gio.* Con lite conserva. *Disc.* Dunque con lite produsse. *Giov.* Così pare. *Disc.* Che cosa è questa lite, con la qual la Natura produsse e conserva ogni cosa, così eterna come caduca? Tu non rispondi? *Gio.* Gran cosa è questa, che tu disideri di sapere. *Disc.* Anzi no: perocché niuno è sì cieco, che non veda me poverella esser quella, con la quale la nostra madre natura produsse e conserva ogni cosa.¹⁹⁷

Discordia concludes by stating that everyone can see she is the natural force that creates and conserves everything. The last words are also the beginning of the oration to move Jove that Discordia announced before. Then she presents herself as the first means created by Nature to give birth to everything else: “[Natura] fece dunque come far suole il fabbro, il qual dovendo fabbricar un coltello, forma primieramente il martello, onde il ferro si batta.”¹⁹⁸ Despite Discordia’s effort to convince Jove that she should be considered a necessary and beneficial goddess, at the end of the speech the king of gods considers her speech only a narration and not an oration, for she did not provide any proof: “finora la tua orazione è stata solamente narrazione, e non provasti nessuna cosa.”¹⁹⁹ Jove thus invites her to produce a second oration to persuade everybody that

¹⁹⁷ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 138.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 138.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 139.

only one discord exists and this is a benefic force even though sometimes its effects seem evil. At the beginning Discordia complains about Jove's request and points out that the hypothesis of a double discord would lead to a paradox:

se altra Discordia sono io, ed altra colei, onde si deriva ogni cosa; ed ella ed io semo discordi tra noi; questo sarebbe non solamente duplicar le Discordie, ma triplicarle ancora, anzi moltiplicarle infinitamente. La qual cosa come è fuora d'ogni ragione, così è contraria all'esperienza.²⁰⁰

Two discords would necessarily conflict giving birth to a third discord in conflict with the previous ones and so on. More than one discord, therefore, may not be admitted. Despite this strong argument, which may be called the 'third discord argument' – similar to the 'third man argument' in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – Jove finds it not enough to prove before philosophers that good and evil things derive from the same discord. This reference causes a long invective by Discordia against philosophers who are accused of staying isolated in their ideal towers from which they pretend to understand the universe, whereas they are actually lazy, useless, despicable, and vicious people. They simulate a disdain for money, but they actually covet it. Furthermore, they reject the earthly world as if they were not made of flesh and blood. Moreover, they cheat common ignorant people in showing them they know what gods do. The following citation, which is the first part of the invective, might be a successful manifesto against any metaphysics. Remarkably, it could be subscribed by several ancient sophists, for it collects the most

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 141.

common accusations usually directed against sophists and inverts them to strike the accusers:

Disc. Questi filosofi, Giove, non sono altro che una certa maniera di gente oziosa e da poco, la quale non sa far bene e non ardisce far male; e perché questo misero modo tenuto da loro non sia schernito dalle persone, ma la loro viltà e bassezza d'animo sia riputata virtù, dispregiano tuttavia, con parole però, le ricchezze come cosa di veruno valore. Non si curano parimente né di onore né di vergogna; e tutti quanti i piaceri e le voluptà corporali hanno per nulla, e ne dicono male non altramente che se pure intelligenzie e non di carne e di ossa fussero stati formati. Danno, eziandio, ad intendere al vulgo ignorante che stando chiusi nelle lor camere la notte, quando altri dorme, vedono quello che fan li Dei.²⁰¹

According to the ancient sources, among the major charges, sophists were accused of being greedy in teaching and performing their art for money and honor (Plato, *Hippias major* 282a-e); of looking at the physical world as a source of knowledge and ethics (Plato, *Theaetetus* 151e-152e, 166d-167b, and *Protagoras* 333d-334c); of being skeptical about gods – an example is Protagoras' statement referred by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* IX, 51 – and, in doing so, of menacing the political and civic order (see the reaction of the democratic leader Anytus in Plato, *Meno* 91c); and more generally of misleading people for their own interest. Discordia responds, in fact, by reversing the accusations: philosophers disregard money and honor to cover their cowardice, they

²⁰¹ Ibid. 142.

undervalue earthly life as a source of knowledge and ethics pretending they are pure intellects, they feign a preferential contact with gods, and in doing all this they deceive people about their identity, exploiting their ignorance.

After the invective is concluded, Discordia announces her second oration, as requested by Jove, to prove that discord is singular and causes only good effects. Her speech focuses on demonstrating that conflict is an essential part of the cycle of life, even when it causes painful, destructive events.²⁰² The oration may be persuasive, but because of its length and gravity, Jove falls asleep. A disappointed and desperate Discordia proposes reprising the whole oration in a dialogical form, to keep Jove focused on her reasoning. He agrees and, to insure the effect, requires she proceed with brief statements and questions:

Disc. Ecco Giove, acciocché da qui innanzi tu sia più attento alle mie parole, e men t'incresca l'udire, non parlerò continuamente dal principio alla fine tutta l'intenzion mia; ma di parte in parte ti dimanderò e tu mi risponderai. *Gio.* Son contento, ma parla e chiedi con brevi parole. *Disc.* Volentieri.²⁰³

For the second time Discordia and Jove engage in a Socratic dialogue, but unlike the first time now it aims to ensure the correct order of Jove's reasoning rather than to find new results. They now imitate Socrates and his interlocutors in Plato's dialogues when they review the part of argumentation already developed. This type of dialogue aims more to summarize and retell, possibly with different words, than to add new arguments.

²⁰² Ibid. 143-145.

²⁰³ Ibid. 146.

The process is so efficient that after few exchanges Jove is able to provide long responses reproducing in his own words Discordia's argumentation, while she continues to guide him by providing clarifications and examples to amplify any aspect of the subject. In this way Discordia brings Jove to acknowledge that war is necessary everywhere, even within each human being, where passion and reason constantly fight against each other so that each man carries an inner war ("ogni uomo porta la sua guerra con seco.")²⁰⁴

But after this conciliatory first part, the tone of the dialogue changes. Indeed, Discordia and Jove start to disagree on certain aspects and for the first time Jove is seriously engaged in debating with Discordia. This new part of the dialogue is a dialectical *agon* between opponents who try to prevail over each other by demonstration, confutation, and other verbal techniques.²⁰⁵ Finally Jove, exhausted by his indefatigable interlocutor, asks Discordia to address her arguments to the philosophers who blame her, which gives her the opportunity to add further arguments to the invective against philosophers she already performed:

Gio. Perché non ne parli con questi filosofi, dai quali viene la tua roina, e mostri loro con tue ragioni chi sei? *Disc.* Oimé Giove, non me li nominar più: or credi tu che io sia stata indarno con loro? Mille volte ne avemo parlato di compagnia e disputato questa materia, ma tu non sai ancora come son fatti. Alcuni di loro non intendono la natura degli argomenti, altri fingono di non gli intendere, altri rispondono in guisa, che par che diano legge al cielo e alla terra. Per la qual cosa,

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 150.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 150-159.

stanca di ragionare con esso loro, a te son ricorsa, come a quello il quale, conosciuta la verità mal da loro trattata, mi rendo certa che non gli lascerai impuniti.²⁰⁶

According to Discordia, who says to know them very well, philosophers do not understand the matter or pretend not to, so that discussing with them is painful and unfruitful. Jove asks Mercury, as a messenger between gods and men, to bring Discordia's arguments to the philosophers' attention. He is willing to do this and wants to perform his oration for Discordia's approval before going on earth. The specific goal of his mission is to persuade human beings to consider discord as a beneficial force in their life. In his speech, Mercury points out that the goddess is not to blame if desires and passions are the cause of individual and social conflicts, but even if this were the case, a positive effect would result, for someone's death means life and prosperity for someone else. It is just a matter of perspective: "lei però non dovrete tutti affatto vituperare: con ciò sia cosa che morte e povertà d'alcuno di voi, sia vita e ricchezza dell'altro; e la distruzione dell'imperio di Roma sia stato accrescimento de' barbari."²⁰⁷ Mercury stresses the fact that life is a matter of agonistic contest where every victory means ruin for someone else. The alternative would be a peaceful lack of movement or, in other terms, a permanent state of death.

But when everything seems to be in favor of Discordia's cause, Jove states that her orations lack order and disposition, so that her arguments are confused. When she points out that her essential goal was to provide evidence to defend her dignity, Jove

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 159-160.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 162.

begins to lecture her on the essential role of perspective in persuasive oratory. Indeed, he points out that order and disposition in arguing can be deceiving: “l’ordine e la disposizion delle cose variata in diverse maniere, fa parere quel che non è.” Since she did not give the order she had promised to her discourse – which was to prove, first, that discord is good and natural, and second, that there is only one discord – he fears she was misleading in showing true what is false and vice-versa: “non son sicuro di non esser gabbato da te, sicché il vero mi paia falso ed il falso vero: come anche un medesimo colore nel collo della colomba e dell’anitra diversamente disposto pare ora verde e ora giallo.”²⁰⁸ Therefore, Jove asks Discordia to reshape her reasoning properly. To convince her, Jove gives several examples that show how much disposition/order and perspective count in achieving results in warfare and painting, two arts that share features with oratory:

un medesimo esercito disposto diversamente vince e perde la guerra; una faccia, un panno, una tela medesima, secondo che ella sarà collocate, bella e brutta ti parerà; una dipintura lunga una spanna, da traverso guardata sarà creduta di quattro braccia. Dunque volendo che io dia sentenza finale, provedi che io oda le tue ragioni ordinatamente da principio a fine.²⁰⁹

After this defense of relativism as a matter of fact in oratory, Jove asks Discordia to develop her speech from universal categories to particular things. This last implied reference to a philosophical process instigates a further polemic by Discordia with the

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 163.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 164.

philosophers – called patricides (“filosofi parricidi”) because they refuse to recognize her sovereignty - and causes the goddess to identify herself with a modern Socrates condemned to be miserable forever. Another characteristic of the dialogue suggests a similarity with Socrates from the beginning of the dialogue: Discordia is a goddess, though a controversial one, hidden under the human clothes of the beautiful Ganymede, and Socrates was compared to a monstrous statue of Silenus (Plato, *Symposium* 215a-b) which hides inside a golden god; in both cases the real identity of the character is dissimulated, literally in the former, metaphorically in the latter. Like a roaming and isolated Socrates, Discordia opposes herself to the philosophers who are experts in syllogizing (“sillogizzare”) as well as to Jove who, as an unjust judge, prefers a convincing perspective rather than the strength of facts and evidence. Interestingly, as usual in Speroni’s dialogues, the debate between Discordia and Jove ends without any conclusion. At the end Jove is not satisfied by Discordia’s arguments and they leave each other without any agreement.

The analysis of the major passages of the *Dialogo* has shown the connection with sophistry both in contents and style. However, a last reflection remains to be proposed on the *Dialogo della Discordia* as a whole. In fact, this work significantly collects a variety of literary genres and may be considered as a *mise-en-scène* of the possible techniques a speaker or orator can employ to argue and persuade. From this perspective, the reiteration of the same topic throughout the dialogue can be read as an exercise in the arts of speech, demonstrating in how many styles the same subject can be treated. In fact, Speroni displays three main genres: invective, oration, and dialogue. To be more specific, there are two different types of oration: the first is called narration (“narrazione”) – which does

not provide evidence – by Jove, while the second is an oration that attempts to persuade by proof. Furthermore, there are three types of dialogue: the first is heuristic in maieutic fashion, the second is still Socratic but aims to review and summarize rather than discover new paths, and the third is a dialectical strife without any positive conclusion. The entire *Dialogo della Discordia* may thus be considered an exhibition of different methods available to persuade and win in a verbal contest. Remarkably, the dialogues where the Socratic maieutic is employed are not considered superior. Evidence of this is that they ultimately do not help Discordia and Jove to reach any stable agreement. Moreover, the Socratic method is considered just one among other rhetorical techniques available to an interlocutor or orator. Finally, the vulnerability of any argument and position surfaces as a refrain of the entire *Dialogo*. The relativism and disregard of truth embodied in Jove's defense of "ordine" and "disposizione" as the most important aspects of any argumentation is thus highly representative of the general sense of the work.

2.2. *Dialogo dell'Usura*

Originally, the *Dialogo dell'Usura* between Usura, who presents herself as a goddess, and the comedian Ruzzante was essentially an oration by Usura to defend her legitimacy in human life. In the 1570s, after his works were condemned by the Catholic Inquisition, Speroni had to write a second part of the dialogue, in which Ruzzante accuses Usura of being a deceiver and produces a confutation of her oration.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ The second part is in Speroni. *Opere*. I. 111-132.

Angelo Beolco (c. 1496-1542), better known as Ruzzante, was an Italian actor and playwright in Padua. His comedies in vernacular were appreciated in Padua, Venice, and Ferrara. He had the protection of Luigi Cornaro, who mentioned his sadness for the death of his close friend in the letter sent to Speroni in 1547, the same letter we discussed above and related to the two responses *Contra la sobrietà* and *Per la sobrietà*. Ruzzante died during the preparation of the *mise-en-scène* of the *Canacee*, the only play written by Speroni. Due to their reciprocal esteem and Ruzzante's well-known eloquence, Speroni chose him for the role of respondent in the *Dialogo dell'Usura*.

Scholars have usually paid more attention to Usura's speech, in the first part of the work, because they were attracted by its paradoxical features.²¹¹ This investigation focuses instead on some passages in the counter-oration by Ruzzante, which was not supposed to be paradoxical, given that it was intended to allay any doubt about Speroni's condemnation of Usura. The fact that Ruzzante's response includes several relevant references to sophistry is evidence of Speroni's continued interest in sophistic rhetoric – in a non-paradoxical fashion – in one of his last works.

A dialogical part follows Usura's speech and then Ruzzante delivers his invective. To introduce his argumentation, he announces the three roles he will play to attack Usura's arguments:

Qual che io mi sia, di tre persone ordinatamente contra i tuoi detti farò l'officio.
Farò in prima oratore, anzi retore, scoprendo l'arte da te usata contra te stessa nel tuo proemio: parlerò appresso come filosofo in più di un modo, ma grossamente;

²¹¹ See Cammarosano. *La vita e le opere di Sperone Speroni*. 35-38, and Fournel. *Les dialogues de Sperone Speroni*. 73-91.

perché i poeti sono filosofi qualche volta, ma non del numero di quei fini: ultimamente farò officio di buon cristiano: e in tutte tre queste sette sarò cristian sempre mai.²¹²

He declares he is going to play three different roles to attack her speech: first the role of an orator, second, a philosopher, and third, a good Christian. The most interesting part is Ruzzante acting as an orator or more precisely – he clarifies – as a rhetorician. He claims that well-crafted orations have very short introduction, whereas Usura's speech has a long one. The misleading practice of long introductions aims to confuse the listener in order to easily reach his or her soul and to persuade him or her in the speaker's favor. Overwhelming the public with an excessive proem, the orator hides the turpitude of the subject of his or her speech, exactly what Usura attempted previously:

nelle [orazioni] turpi, che sono brutte e fastidiose, sempre i proemi son lunghe ciance; acciocché quelle dissimulando ed ascondendo nel mucchio loro la turpitudine del subietto, con insinuazion frodolente passino al core delli auditori senza avvedersene alcun di loro, e di questi cotai proemi fu uno il tuo senza dubbio; ove grande ora di molte e varie tue parolette fu ingombrata la mente mia, prima che a nome ti palesassi.²¹³

According to Ruzzante, Usura performed a defective oratory and imperfectly copied the greatest ancient examples:

²¹² Speroni. *Opere*. I. 115.

²¹³ Ibid. 116.

Anticamente scrisse Gorgia con qualcuno altro di quei sofisti sue orazioni dimostrative per Palamede e per Elena ed alcune altre ne fe' Platon nel Convivio laudando Amore in diversi modi; e tutte intere e perfette: e nondimeno non son sì lunghe d'assai, come è il proemio di questa tua.²¹⁴

The three examples quoted in the passage are the orations *Defense of Palamedes* and *Encomium of Helen* by the sophist Gorgias, and the dialogue *Symposium* by Plato. All the three could be read in Latin translation. Gorgias' works were published in the Aldine anthology entitled *Orationes horum rhetorum* (or *Oratores Graeci*) in 1513. Plato's dialogue was published in Marsilio Ficino's edition of the complete works of Plato in 1484.²¹⁵ Plato's *Symposium*, as Ruzzante suggests, is particular because the same subject is treated in different ways, so that the same work gathers a plurality of perspectives. In fact, Plato presents a sequence of speeches that praise Love even from opposite points of views; the final speech, by Socrates, is supposed to be the best as a revelation of Love's true nature and function. Nevertheless, Ruzzante only mentions the subject of the *Symposium* and does not cite Socrates' speech as superior; rather he sees perfection in all the orations.

Ruzzante disregards the contents of the speeches because he is interested instead in proportion, highlighting that the ancient examples he brought are shorter than the introduction of Usura's speech. She is certainly guilty for having defended a vice, but Ruzzante points out above all the defective form of her speech: "Essendo adunque

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. 39-40.

disonestissima la tua causa, e non sappiendo nel tuo proemio dissimular la disonestà, né simular di dissimularla; men mal facevi per onor tuo a tacere, che non hai fatto a parlare.”²¹⁶ Usura was unable to hide her dishonesty even with a perfect discourse. Her oratory has no power of persuasion and actually becomes her worst enemy.

The dialogue ends with the victory of Ruzzante, who thanks God and acts as a good Christian. Speroni finds the perfect closure to satisfy the inquisitors: “Io non ho a fare altro, che andar in chiesa alla messa e ringraziar Gesù Cristo della vittoria che mi ha donata: poi questa mia cameretta far benedire dal sacerdote con acqua santa ed orazioni: e così farò.”²¹⁷ This conclusion has no specific interest for our subject and Speroni probably wrote it more to play the role of the good Christian than for any other reason. Despite the flat *finale*, Ruzzante’s speech represents an intriguing as well as revolutionary interpretation of the ancient conflict between rhetoric and philosophy.

Although Gorgias and Plato represented the two opposite sides of one of the major conflicts in the Western culture, Ruzzante does not hesitate to present them in the same category. In only a few lines Ruzzante implicitly reduces the titanic debate developed in Plato’s *Gorgias* to a verbal exercise between people of the same type. The opposition between rhetoric and philosophy, raised by Plato in the first place and still alive in the Renaissance, is erased, and the most metaphysical of Socrates’ pupils is now considered as an author of perfect speeches to emulate as well as those of the sophist Gorgias.

²¹⁶ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 116.

²¹⁷ Ibid. 132.

Chapter IV

The debate on Dante and sophistic poetry

If appearance is to be admitted as the criterion,
either we must say that every appearance is true, as Protagoras said,
or that every one is false, as Xenocrates of Corinth said

Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* I

During the 1570s, a broad debate on the value of Dante's poetry, especially the *Divine Comedy*, burst onto the scene of the Italian *milieu* and involved several authors, such as Rodolfo Castravilla, Belisario Bulgarini (1539-c. 1619), Sperone Speroni, Jacopo Mazzoni, and Torquato Tasso, to mention the most renowned. While this matter has been a major scholarly subject since Michele Barbi published his *Dante nel Cinquecento* (1890), only in the most recent decades have a handful of scholars started working on topics strictly connected to this subject. These examples of scholarship include Mazzoni's interpretation of poetry as a kind of sophistry in his defense of Dante published in 1587, Tasso's response in the last version of his *Discorsi del poema eroico* published in 1594, and the potential legacy of this for the Baroque literary culture.²¹⁸

²¹⁸ See the work of C. Scarpati. "Iacopo Mazzoni tra Tasso e Marino." *Aevum* 59 (1985): 433-458; E. Russo. "Il rifiuto della sofistica nelle postille tassiane a Jacopo Mazzoni." *La cultura* 38 (2000): 279-318; Id. "La risposta al Mazzoni nei *Discorsi del poema eroico*." Id., *L'ordine, la fantasia e l'arte. Ricerche per un quinquennio tassiano (1588-1592)*. Roma: Bulzoni, 2002. 178-199.

Although scholars have reached important results, there is as yet no study that connects the sixteenth-century debate on Dante and poetry with the rehabilitation of ancient sophistry proposed by Speroni nor with the broader rebirth of sophistry that took place, in several forms, since the beginning of the fifteenth century, as shown in the previous chapter.

This chapter aims to fill the gap in international scholarship by analyzing the role of the debate on Dante within the broader history of the Italian interpretation of the sophistic movement as a positive force enhancing public life. More specifically, this chapter will address the following main points, which have not yet received the attention they deserve. Firstly, Speroni anticipated the connection between poetry and sophistry in his works and provided an important part of the theoretical foundation for the debate that began in the 1570s. Secondly, there is a virtual dialogue between the protagonists of this debate and Ficino's commentary and interpretation of Plato's *Sophist*. Thirdly, the link between poetry and rhetoric in political life is most highly relevant and reveals the strong connection with the ideal of a new sophistry for the city. Fourthly, Mazzoni's discourse on poetry as a kind of sophistry started much earlier than the 1580s; it began in 1573 to be precise, when he published his first defense of Dante. Last but not least, the association of poetry and sophistry is most scandalous because it essentially affirms that not-being can be thought and articulated, which infringes on one of the fundamental rules of Western culture since the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides of Elea.

1. *Tasso's concern about poetry: an overview of the late Cinquecento*

If we are looking for a sixteenth-century text from which one can have a broad overview of our subject, as one would have from a high peak over a landscape, then the 1594 edition of Tasso's *Discorsi del poema eroico* is the best place to start. In fact, Tasso summarizes and discusses the whole matter of the relationship between poetry and sophistic art in the second book of his *Discorsi* and provides the names and arguments of the main protagonists in the debate. Above all, Tasso elaborates his response to Jacopo Mazzoni, whom he considers the most dangerous of his adversaries.²¹⁹

Starting from both a Platonic and Aristotelian background, Tasso argues that if poets are imitators then they are supposed to imitate truth, since falsehood does not exist, and what does not exist cannot be imitated. Tasso then describes the territory of poetry and defines the terms of the conflict between those who consider poetry as an art dealing with true realities, either physical or metaphysical, and those who associate poetry with sophistry, thereby implicitly admitting not-being as a subject of speech. In a sort of epic *agon* that involves the major figures of the Italian Cinquecento, Tasso leads the first group against the dangerous offenders led by Mazzoni. Their competition is not just about the value of Dante's *Comedy*, nor is it related solely to the nature of poetry, but rather is an expression of two opposite opinions about language as an autonomous tool that is legitimate to create new poetic universes, private and public values, and myths and traditions shared by a community. As Claudio Scarpati pointed out, this conflict represents the dawn of the Baroque; that is, the age of Giambattista Marino and its practice of poetic language as an auto-referential device conceived with the main purpose

²¹⁹ T. Tasso. *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e del poema eroico*. Ed. L. Poma. Bari: Laterza, 1964. 78-115.

of impressing the audience. In the same period, between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, an epistemological revolution occurs resulting in the birth of modern science. As a result, one might argue that the debate on sophistic poetry was one of the causes for a cultural revolution in the relationship between *res* and *verba*, which affected the liberal arts as much as science.²²⁰

The first author that Tasso opposes is Francesco Robortello who considered the falsehood as the matter of poems while, according to Plato and Aristotle, the falsehood is the matter of the sophist, who works with what is not.²²¹ Robortello was one of the first significant commentators of Aristotle's *Poetics* of the century and in his *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes*, published in 1548, he argues that poetry differs from the other arts of discourse by having the false as its proper matter:

Since, then, poetics has as its subject matter fictitious and fictional discourse, it is clear that the function of poetics is to invent in a proper way its fiction and its untruth; to no other art is it more fitting than to this one to intermingle lies [...] In the lies used by the poetic art, false elements are taken as true, and from them true conclusions are derived.²²²

Objecting this position, Tasso states that the matter of poems is verisimilitude, which is close to truth. Robortello's passage does not mention any connections with sophistic art -

²²⁰ Scarpati. "Iacopo Mazzoni tra Tasso e Marino." 444 and *passim*.

²²¹ Tasso. *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e del poema eroico*. 86.

²²² Quoted from B. Weinberg. *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*. 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961. I. 391: "Cum igitur poetice subiectam sibi habeat pro materie orationem fictam et fabulosam; patet ad poetice pertinere, ut fabulam et mendacium apte confingat; nulliusque alterius artis proprium magis esse; mendacia comminisci, quam huius [...] in poeticis mendaciis principia falsa pro veris assumuntur, atque ex his verae eliciuntur conclusiones."

though any reader could perceive it as implied in the discourse - but it does anticipate the broader and more dangerous poetics that Jacopo Mazzoni presented in the first volume of his two-volume work *Difesa della Commedia di Dante* (“Defense of Dante’s Comedy”) published in 1587.²²³

Tasso found Mazzoni’s ideas so unacceptable that he felt the need to publish a revised version of his *Discorsi* in 1594 with an extended response to Mazzoni’s work. This new edition encompasses an analysis of Mazzoni’s poetics immediately after the discussion of Robortello. Essentially, Tasso refuses Mazzoni’s definition of poetry as a sophistic art that employs fantasy to craft images of non-existent things. Instead, Tasso claims that poetry is a dialectical art, and as such it deals with real or probable things. Indeed, the most perfect poetry imitates things that are, were, or may be, such as Achilles’ wrath, Aeneas’ piety, and the battles engaged by the Trojans and Latins.

Nondimeno la perfettissima imitazione, o la propriissima specie de la poesia, non si ripone sotto la sofistica, o nuova o antica ch’ella sia, ma sotto la dialettica. Molto meno è vero quel che dice il Mazzone, che la perfettissima poesia è la fantastica imitazione: perché sì fatta imitazione è de le cose che non sono e non furono già mai; ma la perfettissima poesia imita le cose che sono, che furono o che possono essere: come fu la guerra di Troia, e l’ira d’Achille, e la pietà d’Enea, e le battaglie fra Troiani e Latini, e l’altre che furono o possono essersi fatte.²²⁴

²²³ The second volume of the same work was published posthumously in 1688.

²²⁴ Tasso. *Discorsi dell’arte poetica e del poema eroico*. 88.

Tasso criticizes all the poets who agreed with Mazzoni's poetics, including the Tuscan poets for having been sophists in writing their amorous verses. Although Tasso does not provide proper names, he is addressing Guido Cavalcanti, the poets of the "dolce stil novo," and perhaps also the Dante of the *Vita nova*, among others.

Though Tasso's response is articulate and clarifies the reasons for his rejection of Mazzoni's theory, the *Discorsi* do not provide a full understanding of the revolutionary conception of poetry in the *Difesa* of 1587. Mazzoni's discourse is more an ensemble of different possible perspectives with a long list of quotes supporting them than a consistent treatise. The richness in the variety of authors cited and theoretical paths that stem from them, the lack of a core structure in the essay, and the repetitions within the hundreds of pages have left different impressions on all of the scholars who have approached this work. Weinberg, a true pioneer in the attempt to provide a complete summary of Mazzoni's work, defines it as a "vastly erudite study, with hundreds of authors cited and innumerable texts; it goes into almost interminable theoretical backgrounds for each of the defenses."²²⁵ On the other hand, Baxter Hathaway called the *Difesa* "the greatest burst of aesthetic speculation in sixteenth-century Italy."²²⁶ Twenty years later, Enrico Musacchio and Gigino Pellegrini, authors of an edition of the *Introduzione* of the volume published in 1587, noticed the coexistence of different points of view on poetry that struggle to agree.²²⁷ In summary, the strongest impression in reading Mazzoni's work is that it is designed as a plurality of discourses nourished by a

²²⁵ Weinberg. *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*. II. 883 (for a summary of the main points of Mazzoni's work: 635-646; 877-883).

²²⁶ B. Hathaway. *The Age of Criticism: The Late Renaissance in Italy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962. 5.

²²⁷ J. Mazzoni. *Introduzione alla Difesa della Commedia di Dante*. Eds. E. Musacchio and G. Pellegrini. Bologna: Cappelli, 1982. 15-16.

broad range of traditions, all generated from the same concern – the defense of Dante and the sophistic poetry – but following different and parallel directions; not at all an easy textbook for a hypothetical course of poetics.

Despite the difficulty of his writing, Mazzoni was a very successful professor in all the universities in which he taught. This information comes from the scholar Pier Antonio Serassi who, after publishing a biography of Torquato Tasso in 1785, decided to also write about his opponent. In his *La vita di Jacopo Mazzoni* (1790), Serassi reports evidence of Mazzoni's excellence in addressing students and connects this to his peculiar mind that contemporaries admired as a wonder. For example, Serassi quotes an oration written by Pier Segni, a member of the "Accademia della Crusca," to honor Mazzoni when he died. Mazzoni's mind is depicted as a beautiful garden where the plurality and order of diverse plants amazes everybody:

quel suo felicissimo ingegno si poteva agguagliare ad un ben coltivato giardino, nel quale siccome la moltitudine e varietà delle piante e l'ordine del loro scompartimento porge molto diletto a chi lo rimira, così il fertilissimo ingegno con la varietà delle scienze e col bell'ordine [...] maraviglioso diletto porgevano a ciascheduno.²²⁸

One may comment that such a garden would be enjoyable at first glance, while Mazzoni's *Difesa*, although a result of this flourishing mind, requires a reader's patience to be appreciated. However, we do not aim at exploring this work as a whole. On the

²²⁸ P. Serassi. *La vita di Jacopo Mazzoni*. Roma: Pagliarini, 1790. 90-91.

contrary, the next part of this chapter is dedicated to pointing out specific passages that most closely concern our main subject: the relationship of poetry with sophistry as well as with the political life of the city.

2. Crafting idols: Jacopo Mazzoni's poetics

In the *Introduzione e sommario* of his *Difesa della Commedia di Dante*, Mazzoni addresses the whole poetical art and aims to define its proper object. The most relevant source for this work is Plato's *Sophist* that Mazzoni could have read in the Latin translation with commentary provided by Marsilio Ficino.

As discussed in the first chapter, Plato presented two kinds of image-making arts with the purpose of unmasking the sophist. Plato calls "icastic" the art that makes a likeness and "fantastic" the art that makes semblance. Both the arts produce images, or "idols" ("idoli" in Ficino's translation): "icastic idols" in the former case and "fantastic idols" in the latter. Plato, followed by Ficino, condemned sophistry as a type of "fantastic" art and its products as persuasive as well as dangerous illusions.

Mazzoni retains the Platonic distinction, but he attributes a positive value to the fantastic art and proposes its idols as its most valuable results. After a discourse about the different meanings of the word idol, he proposes that poetry, like painting and sculpture, imitates what man can voluntarily conceive with his fantasy. According to Mazzoni, Aristotle's *Poetics* also addresses this object of imitation:

Concludo dunque che questa specie d'idolo è quella, ch'è adeguato oggetto dell'imitatione humana e che quando Aristotele disse nel principio della *Poetica* che tutte le specie di poesia erano imitatione, intese quella imitatione c'ha per oggetto l'idolo che nasce totalmente dall'artificio humano nel modo che si è dichiarato.²²⁹

Mazzoni is comfortable interpreting the beginning of Aristotle's *Poetics* in a way that supports his own position by arguing that his own conclusions complete and go beyond Aristotle's.

Despite the fact that the “idolo phantastico” (“fantastic idol”), as an image of non-existing objects, is the most proper matter for poetry, Mazzoni concedes that sometimes truth may play this role. He then argues that the “incredible” (“unbelievable”) would completely destroy the poetical art, and thereby a fair conclusion would be that the specific poetical object is not the true or the false, but rather the “credibile” that may be either true or false. What is credible is persuasive and persuasion is poetry's goal. Mazzoni then introduce a new term connected to belief, the objective correlative (“oggetto correlativo”):

È dunque stimato il credibile oggetto correlativo della credenza, o vogliamo dire persuasione, o fede. E la credenza un habito (largamente parlando) della conclusione, come anchora è l'opinione e la scienza. Ma la scienza viene prodotta

²²⁹ J. Mazzoni. *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante, distinta in sette libri, nella quale si risponde alle opposizioni fatte al Discorso di M. Iacopo Mazzoni, e si tratta pienamente dell'arte poetica [...] parte prima, che contiene li primi tre libri*. Cesena: Appresso B. Raverij, 1587. sec. 15.

da cagione necessaria, il che non si può dire della opinione, ne della fede, c'hanno cagioni contingenti.²³⁰

The relationship that Mazzoni proposes between the credible and belief as habit introduces the public dimension of poetry in the discourse, while the noteworthy mention of an objective correlative anticipates the poetics of Thomas Stearns Eliot and Eugenio Montale, in which particular objects or literary images are predisposed to evoke specific emotions in the reader.²³¹ However, in Mazzoni's version, the "oggetto correlativo," which is credible imaginative material, is related to the ethical sphere of public life. Remarkably, persuasion, instead of truth, is responsible for creating and stabilizing public belief. In other words, it does not matter if poetry shapes the habits of a community upon true or false idols as long as the poet is able to persuade his public to follow his credible creation. The imaginative world of the poet structures the social dimension, which was one of the functions of Homeric poetry in ancient Greece.

This is a crucial step in Mazzoni's exploration of the matter, for poetry is now connected to rhetoric and sophistic art not only because of the definition of "idolo" but also through its relation to the public. The credible is used to persuade and differs from opinion because it is about particulars and not universals, and it addresses not only people's intellect but also their needs and desires ("appetito").²³² In Mazzoni's discourse, the public sphere is an essential part of the process of creating effective poetry. The

²³⁰Ibid. sec. 48.

²³¹ See the literary theory first set forth by T.S. Eliot in the essay "Hamlet and His Problems" and published in *The Sacred Wood* (1920).

²³² J. Mazzoni. *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante, distinta in sette libri, nella quale si risponde alle opposizioni fatte al Discorso di M. Iacopo Mazzoni, e si tratta pienamente dell'arte poetica [...] parte prima, che contiene li primi tre libri*. Cesena: Appresso B. Raverij, 1587. sec. 50.

credible must be conveyed by aesthetic means and speech strategies, such as comparisons and parables, because the poet must speak to any kind of people, including rude and uneducated men: “perché il poeta deve ragionare col popolo, nel quale sono molti huomini rozi e poco intendenti.”²³³

The poet has to communicate even intellectual and abstract realities in a way that ordinary people are equipped to understand. He treats his subjects in a credible mode, employing comparisons and similitudes taken from sensible things, so that people who understand that truth resides in sensible things in a way that is revealed by the poet can easily believe that the same is true of intelligible things:

E per questo ne tratta egli col modo credibile, cio è insegnadole per mezzo di comparationi e similitudini prese dalle cose sensibili, e il popolo, che conosce che nelle cose sensibili la verità sta nel modo che li vien mostrata dal poeta, crede per questo facilmente che così anchora sia nelle cose intelligibili.²³⁴

In this way, the poet can convey the highest registers of content to unlearned men. According to Mazzoni, Dante embodied the ideal poet, and had Plato read his *Paradiso*, he would have changed his mind about the value of poets' art.

Looking at the well-known myth of the cave in Plato's *Republic VII* - likely one of the first references in Mazzoni's mind considering the commentary on the *Republic* he wrote around 1577 - we can appreciate the revolutionary idea of poetry expressed in the *Difesa* of 1587. Most of the scholarship on this topic has concerned Mazzoni's inclusion

²³³ Ibid. sec. 52.

²³⁴ Ibid. sec. 52.

of poetry in the genre of sophisticated art with regard to crafting false idols, while the connection with the addressee and the social context has been neglected. The reference to the myth of the cave, even if not mentioned in Mazzoni's text, can help in understanding his new approach to poetry in the appropriate context of the city. Indeed, the figure that he names "poet" actually simultaneously possesses the characteristics of the epic poet, sophistic rhetorician, and public mentor. This kind of poet lives, metaphorically speaking, in the Platonic cave among the shadows that he contributes to create in order to teach, lead and entertain the people. At the same time, the cave is no longer a place from which to escape, for it is the normal condition of human existence, and the men inside are no longer slaves, but rather citizens of a Renaissance state, such as Venice the Serenissima or any other place where the middle class has a major role in public life. This type of state is closer to the Athens of Pericles, Gorgias and Protagoras, than to the Platonic ideal republic.

Mazzoni clearly perceives that he is proposing a connection between two arts, poetry and sophistry, that others – such as Torquato Tasso - considered completely different and even opposite in nature; this is why he argues for a defense of sophisticated art:

ma io m'accorgo d'haver alterati gli animi de' poeti, ponendo all'arte loro riputata fin'hora divina, il nome di sophistica che viene stimato brutto e infame. E però per consolarli in qualche modo, mi voglio fermare alquanto sopra quest'arte de'

sophisti e insieme dimostrare com'ella habbia e non habbia buono o cattivo sentimento.²³⁵

For clarification of the true nature and role of sophistry, Mazzoni relies on Lucius Flavius Philostratus, a Greek sophist who lived between the second and third century A.D. and wrote the *Lives of the Sophists*, which is supposed to be an authoritative voice that balances Plato's condemnation. Mazzoni recalls that, according to Philostratus, sophistry must be called philosophical rhetoric, since it argues the same things treated by philosophers but in a different way: "Sono dunque parole di Philostrato: bisogna nomare l'antica sophistica una rhetorica philosophante, essendo ch'ella disputasse delle medesime cose delle quali trattavano ancora li philosophi."²³⁶

Sophistry is what treats everything rhetorically, that is credibly: "sophistica era quella che parlava di tutte le cose rhetoricamente, cioè credibilmente".²³⁷ If the credible is substantially the matter shaped by both sophistry and poetry, then the two arts are closely related. And in fact they are, according to Mazzoni's original idea of poetry as a kind of sophistry.

Mazzoni claims for a superiority of what he calls "sophistica antica" ("ancient sophistry") that did not aim to corrupt minds with twisted ideas. According to Mazzoni, poetry is close to that type of sophistry. He attempts to define the specific nature of poetry in different manners, and in one of the most clear definitions he claims that poetry

²³⁵ Ibid. sec. 54.

²³⁶ Ibid. sec. 54.

²³⁷ Ibid. sec. 55.

is a sophistic art because it imitates and has the credible as its subject and delight for its aim.

conclude adunque risolutamente, che la poesia è arte sophistica e per l'imitazione, che è il suo genere proprio, e lo credibile, che è il suo soggetto, e per lo diletto, che è il suo fine; poiché per essere sotto quel genere, per essere intorno a quel soggetto, e per rimirare quel fine, viene astretta molte volte a dar luogo al falso.²³⁸

The involvement of the poetic art in political life is explicitly stated when Mazzoni proposes to consider poetry as a part of the “facoltà civile” (“civil sphere”) along with political art.

parmi che ragionevolmente si possa dire che la facoltà civile si deva dividere in due principalissime parti l'una delle quali considera la rettitudine dell'operationi e fu nomata col nome generale politica, cioè civile. L'altra considera la rettitudine della cessazione o la rettitudine delle operationi de' giochi e fu nomata poetica. E per questo io stimo che la *Poetica* sia il nono libro della *Politica* [d'Aristotele].²³⁹

The inclusion of Aristotle's *Poetics* as a part of his *Politics* is an original perspective that allows Mazzoni to present his theory as consistent with Aristotelianism, a tradition closer to the Counter-Reformation and hence acceptable to the Catholic Church. In the regulation of public life, poetics rules recreational time, or time of cessation, in which

²³⁸ Ibid. sec. 60.

²³⁹ Ibid. sec. 66-67.

citizens may attend spectacles such as tragedies, comedies, declamations, and other types of performance. In so doing, poetics plays a fundamental role in balancing the activities ruled by the political art.

The following passage clarifies the relationship among politics, poetics, and poetry. As part of the civil sphere, poetics prescribes the standards, rules, and laws of the idols in poetry, so that poetics deals with the idea of the idol and poetry with the making of it. Poetics is, though, a ruling art that uses the idol made by poets for the public needs mentioned above.

È dunque la poetica parte della facoltà civile e è quella che prescrive la norma, la regola, e le leggi dell'idolo poetico alla poesia. Di maniera che si può dire che la poetica consideri l'idea dell'idolo e la poesia lo faccia. Onde la poetica sarà nel suo genere arte commandante e usante l'idolo fatto da' poeti [...] e la poesia sarà nel suo genere arte fabbricante e facitrice dell'idolo che ha poi da essere usato dalla poetica e dalla facoltà civile.²⁴⁰

Afterwards, Mazzoni claims that if we consider “diletto” one of the goals of poetry and poetry as a part of sophistry, then we may conclude that Plato rejects from his ideal republic only the kind of poetry and sophistry that aim for “diletto” alone because it ruins the city. It results that there exists a commendable sophistry that is welcome in the city.²⁴¹ Furthermore, poetry is comparable with medicine since it cures the citizens and

²⁴⁰ Ibid. sec. 67. On the role of the sophistic poetry in civil life, see G. Giglioni. “The Matter of the Imagination. The Renaissance Debate over Icastic and Fantastic Imagination,” *Camenae* 8 (2010): 1-21. 7-8.

²⁴¹ Mazzoni. *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*. sec. 73.

provides pleasant learning for people who are under the influence of passions and unable to control their lives through reason.

Mazzoni reverses the Platonic perspective by claiming that his interpretation reveals the real intention of Plato. At the climax of this move, he argues that Plato conceived one of the three genres of poetry, tragedy, as a means for the education of magistrates and philosopher-kings. Representing the dreadful and terrible downfall of great persons, tragedy principally serves princes, magistrates, and powerful citizens, for it keeps them always under the justice of the laws and moderates – so to speak – the magnitude of their fortune.

la tragedia rimirò principalmente l'utile e il giovamento de' principi, de' magistrati e de' potenti, e per questo, per tenerli sottoposti sempre alla giustitia delle leggi, rappresenta sempre gli horribili e atroci casi delle persone grandi, il che viene ad essere quasi un freno che rattempera e modera la grandezza della fortuna loro.²⁴²

By blending an Aristotelian cathartic function of tragedy, a Platonic division of social classes, and a Christian mortification of vanity, Mazzoni not only reintroduces poetry as a sophistic art in the city, but he also honors it with the supreme role of educating the rulers. Understandably, one hardly recognizes the original Plato in Mazzoni's words. This aspect of the *Introduzione e sommario*, along with the others examined above, is the measure of the revolutionary interpretation provided in the *Difesa della Comedia di*

²⁴² Ibid. sec. 80.

Dante. Some of those aspects are anticipated in a previous *Difesa* published in 1573, a much more concise work in which Mazzoni joins sophists and skeptics to defend Dante from Castravilla, Bulgarini, and the other detractors in the quarrel that occurred in the second half of the Cinquecento.

3. *Dante among sophists and skeptics*

The debate over Dante's poetry, which for several years involved the major figures of the Italian Cinquecento, began in 1572. In this year a manuscript titled *Discorso di M. Ridolfo Castravilla nel quale si mostra l'imperfettione della Commedia di Dante contro al Dialogo delle lingue del Varchi* circulated as a response to Benedetto Varchi's work from the intellectual *milieu* of Siena. Castravilla is probably a pseudonym, and the real identity of the author is still unknown. Bellisario Bulgarini, who had an important role in the quarrel on Dante, probably had a part in the composition or revision of the *Discorso*. Castavilla's work aims to argue against Varchi's theory that Dante was superior to Homer. Castravilla's principle argument is that Dante's *Comedy* does not follow the rules stated in Aristotle's *Poetics* and therefore is necessarily defective.

The quarrel gave Mazzoni the opportunity to write his first contribution for the exegesis of Dante's work fifteen years before the publication of the *Difesa* of 1587 examined above. In fact, in 1573, Mazzoni entered the dispute by publishing a *Discorso in difesa della Commedia del divino poeta Dante* which elicited a response from

Bulgarini who read Mazzoni's work in 1576 and wrote his *Considerazioni*, eventually published in 1583, to defend Castravilla's work.

Mazzoni's *Discorso* presents an interesting perspective on Dante, never pointed out by scholars, that confirms the originality of its author and proves that sophistry along with skepticism can offer a tool to defend Dante. In other words, Jacopo Mazzoni challenged the detractors of Dante by defending the agreement of the *Comedy* with Aristotle's *Poetics* from a point of view that was at the intersection of Aristotelianism, sophistry, and skepticism. Whether or not Mazzoni succeeded may be a matter of debate, but for our purposes we are mostly interested in the articulation of sophistry and skepticism applied in the *Discorso* of 1573.

Mazzoni's *Discorso* is a treatise made of ten "particelle" ("particles"), or chapters, that are introduced by a short abstract describing the main issue treated in each one. The first two "particelle" address poetry in general and have the function of introducing the discussion that follows. Mazzoni introduces the first chapter by arguing that poetry is an appropriate matter of discussion for a philosopher and that Dante especially deserves a philosophical approach since he mentioned in his *Comedy* all the philosophical traditions and arts. Dante's poem, as a result, becomes an eclectic encyclopedia in verse.²⁴³ In chapters three through ten, Mazzoni considers whether or not the plot of the *Comedy* is an imitation of a real voyage, whether or not Dante is a good author of comedy, and in which specific aspect he demonstrates the characteristics that make him a good author.

²⁴³ G. Mazzoni. *Discorso in difesa della Commedia del divino poeta Dante*. Ed. M. Rossi. Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1898. 11.

Chapter three is the most interesting for our purposes. It addresses the question of the truthfulness of the voyage described in Dante's poem: "che nel poema di Dante vi è vera imitazione d'attione, e non semplice narratione d'un sogno, come molti hanno creduto."²⁴⁴ Mazzoni argues that even though some verses in the *Comedy* could imply that Dante means to narrate a dream, a higher number of extended passages clearly prove the contrary. Intending to avoid a long, boring discussion ("noiosa lunghezza"), Mazzoni highlights what he indicates as the focus of the issue discussed in the chapter. This is the term "fantasia" used by Dante in *Paradiso* XXXIII, 140-142 and *Purgatorio* XVII, 25 to describe the activity of the mind in either wakefulness or sleep. Mazzoni commences his line of argumentation by opposing Giovanni Boccaccio, one of the first interpreters of the *Comedy*, to Aristotle. Mazzoni argues that although in his *Corbaccio*, or *Laberinto d'Amore*, Boccaccio presents fantasy as a faculty that produces dreams, Aristotle's *De anima II* defines fantasy as a faculty that we consciously use to craft false images, which is exactly what poets do in their poems.²⁴⁵ As a result, Dante is included in the Aristotelian tradition as the most excellent example of a poet. To help the reader understand the correct meaning of "fantasia", Mazzoni provides an interesting interpretation of the verse "a l'alta fantasia mancò possa" (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 142) rephrased as "all'alto mio concetto poetico qui mancò forza" ("my high poetical concept did not have enough strength").²⁴⁶ In his verses, Dante refers to the limit of his mind to understand and of his imagination to represent the nature of God. Although Mazzoni does not explicate the reason for his interpretation of "fantasia" as "concetto poetico," one can

²⁴⁴ Ibid. 61.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. 64-65.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. 65.

notice the attempt to ennoble imagination, or fantasy, while the use of the term “concetto” implied the Aristotelian interpretation of Dante’s poetry. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Mazzoni avoids mentioning any Platonic or Neoplatonic sources related to the interpretation of “fantasia” in Dante’s work. When he published his work in 1573, Mazzoni was certainly aware of the very well-known commentaries of Marsilio Ficino on Plato, Plotinus and the other Neo-Platonists in which fantasy is a central activity of the soul in many contexts, including love, medicine, magic, and demonology. Ficino’s interpretation of the power of fantasy in the physical and spiritual spheres had an extended influence in the Renaissance that is well documented by international scholarship, which resists summary because of the extent of the subject. Nevertheless, given the relation with the topics treated in this dissertation, it is worth mentioning the fact that in Ficino’s commentary to the *Sophist*, the nature and function of fantasy and imagination play a major role, as Michael J. B. Allen demonstrated in his introductory studies, much more than what Plato’s dialogue suggests.²⁴⁷ One may conclude that Mazzoni avoided mentioning Platonism and Neo-Platonism and that he used the Aristotelian term “concetto” to strengthen the defense of Dante as an Aristotelian.

Although the issue seems to be clarified, Mazzoni presents a further argument that complicates the matter, thereby suggesting a very interesting interpretation of Dante’s *Comedy*. Assuming that Dante sometimes used dreaming as a metaphor for his poetry, Mazzoni defends the legitimacy of this choice because dreaming and crafting poems share fantasy as a tool to create unreal worlds: “il sogno e la poesia sono fondati in una

²⁴⁷ M. J. B. Allen. *Idastes: Marsilio Ficino’s Interpretation of Plato’s Sophist*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1989. 117-204.

medesima potentia dell'anima, perciò che e l'uno e l'altro ha per soggetto la fantasia".²⁴⁸

Any learned reader could find Aristotle's *De anima* III (428a-429a) to be a source for this argument. Furthermore, Mazzoni argues that Dante, following a type of metaphor presented in Aristotle's *Poetics*, claims that poetry and dreaming are similar activities: "la poesia era un sogno d'huomini desti, e 'l sonno era la poesia d'huomini dormentati."²⁴⁹

Moreover, Petrarca followed Dante in several of his verses when he wanted to show the futility of pleasures, for example at the beginning of his *Canzoniere*: "quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno." Then Mazzoni extends this discussion to a generic category of ancient authors, both poets and philosophers, who support Dante's use of the word dream as a metaphor; in fact, they argued that all kinds of arts and sciences produce anything but dreams: "gli antichi, più arditamente, dissero che non solamente la poesia, ma tutte l'arti e tutte le scienze che facciano habito nell'intelletto possibile o pratico o contemplativo, ch'egli si sia, erano sogni."²⁵⁰ Mazzoni quotes Homer, Plautus and Virgil as witnesses and concludes:

sì che da tutto questo può apparire che se bene havesse Dante chiamato il suo poema sogno metaforicamente, che nondimeno, per le ragioni dette di sopra, non meritarebbe esser ripreso; poi che gli antichi alcuna volta usaro metafore parlando de' suoi [*their*] poemi, e 'l sogno abbracciando, secondo l'oppenione de gli antichi, metaforicamente tutte l'arti e tutte le scienze, fu nondimeno fra tutte l'altre cose reputato molto simile alla poesia.²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Mazzoni. *Discorso in difesa della Commedia del divino poeta Dante*. 68.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. 68.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 69.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 69-70.

Promoting something of a Copernican revolution in the system of arts and sciences, Mazzoni places poetry as a new center of human knowledge. Poetry becomes a broader genre in which contemplative and practical disciplines are included. No sophist or skeptic has been mentioned so far, but any knowledgeable reader could guess that Mazzoni was preparing to elucidate their role as defenders of the new vast realm of poetry. Indeed, the occasion to introduce them is given by the verb “parere” that Dante often employs as a synonym for perceiving:

Alla voce *parea*, usata spesso da Dante, dico che noi non dovemo per questo lasciarci indurre a credere ch’egli sognasse, perciò che non è dubbio ch’ancora a’ desti ponno parere molte cose; anzi molti filosofi antichi, come Senofane, Seniade, Anacharsi, Dionisiodoro, Gorgia, Metrodoro, Protagora, Eutidemo, Arcesilao, Carneade, Pirrone, Sesto Empirico e molti altri dissero che tutte le cose parevano, e per tanto niente potersi intendere nel modo che è, ma si bene nel modo che appare.²⁵²

Most of the names quoted above were well known at the time of Mazzoni’s work. Plato entitled three of his dialogues after Gorgias, Protagoras, and Euthydemus. In the latter, Dionysodorus is one of the main characters. They are all sophists, although the first two are the most popular and particularly affiliated with skepticism. For example, Seneca classifies Protagoras as a skeptic in his *Moral Epistles* 88, while Sextus Empiricus’

²⁵² Ibid. 70.

Against the Logicians summarizes Gorgias' work *On Non-Being* to support a skeptical approach to knowledge and communication.²⁵³ Besides Sextus, Pyrrho represents one of the main streams of ancient skepticism, while Arcesilaus initiated the skeptical phase of the Platonic Academy and Carneades led the so-called New Academy following Archesilaus' teaching. Despite the fact that several authors quoted in the passage above were considered among the worst enemies of both Platonism and Aristotelianism, Mazzoni presents them as valuable sources for defending Dante and promoting poetry.

All of the aforementioned philosophers share a theory of knowledge that essentially rehabilitates the uncertain nature of perception as a primary source of knowledge. According to Aristotle, everything we know is perceived before being processed as a concept, notion, idea, or whatever one wants to call the intelligible contents; but since, according to skeptics and some sophists, sensibility cannot grasp the real nature of any object, the only reality with which we can be in contact is illusory. If this is true, then poetry is mankind's natural way to approach the world, even when we deceive ourselves by considering our intellect as a source of certainty. Remarkably, Mazzoni's poetics agrees with the closure of the third part of Speroni's *Apologia dei dialoghi*; specifically, the speech of Cardinale Amulio on the essential weakness of human knowledge.²⁵⁴ The main difference is that Mazzoni believes poetry to be the broader category subsuming other forms of knowledge, while the character Amulio considers any kind of knowledge as a form of sophistry. In both cases, appearance has a central role.

²⁵³ MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. 25.

²⁵⁴ Speroni. *Opere*. I. 390.

Perhaps the convergence mentioned above is not a mere coincidence but rather an example of a tendency of the cultural *milieu* that the two authors shared and promoted. Both Speroni and Mazzoni, like their contemporaries in the same area, were educated and wrote their works under the influence of a heterodox Aristotelianism. Because of geopolitical reasons, the northeastern area, which approximately included Cesena, Bologna, Padua, and Venice, was independent from Rome's influence, not only politically, but also intellectually in the way to interpret Aristotle. As several scholars have proven, from the second half of the Cinquecento to the beginning of the Seicento, the universities and academies of the area were often animated by philosophers who accepted and practiced skepticism as a tool to avoid a dogmatic version of Aristotelianism.²⁵⁵ The translation of Sextus Empiricus' works in Latin by Henri Estienne in 1562 increased the popularity of skeptic thought, but the skeptical Aristotelianism, or Aristotelian skepticism, was already initiated by Pietro Pomponazzi at the University of Padua and then Bologna decades before Estienne's translation. In fact, Pomponazzi, often called "Peretto," was the mentor of a generation of Aristotelians, Speroni among them, that considered Aristotle's philosophy as a perfectible tool and skepticism as a necessary antidote against all dogmatism. The increasing diffusion of skeptical tendencies in the later Cinquecento found in the Venitian *milieu*, so resistant to the Counter-Reformation Aristotelianism of Rome, an ideal place to proliferate.

²⁵⁵ cfr. Ch. B. Schmitt. "The rediscovery of ancient skepticism in modern times." *The Skeptical Tradition*. Ed. M. F. Burnyeat. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; R. H. Popkin. *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle*. Oxford (UK) and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; A. De Pace. *Noetica e scetticismo. Mazzoni versus Castellani*. "Accademia" Cahiers. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006. It should be noted that Gianfrancesco Pico's *Examen Vanitatis*, published in Mirandola in 1520, had already given a relevant contribution for the knowledge of Sextus Empiricus's works (see G. M. Cao. *Scepticism and Orthodoxy: Gianfrancesco Pico as a Reader of Sextus Empiricus. With a Facing Text of Pico's Quotations from Sextus*. Pisa: F. Serra, 2007).

Cesare Cremonini is an emblematic example of a skeptical Aristotelian engaged in a cultural war against the Jesuits' attempt to compete with the University of Padua by taking over the higher education in the area. After teaching for three decades at Ferrara, Cremonini moved to the University of Padua in the 1590s and taught in there as his friend and rival Galileo Galilei. Sharing part of Galilei's vicissitudes, Cremonini was accused by the Inquisition of using philosophy against theology for personal and evil purposes. Cremonini did not become a martyr of free speech like Galileo, but his legacy is evident in the fact that his students founded the Accademia degli Incogniti in Venice in 1630 with a clear disposition towards the practice of utilizing doubt as a tool in investigating physical as well as moral issues.²⁵⁶

While scholars have investigated how skepticism affected Aristotelianism in the Italian Renaissance, there is no study on how sophistry, interconnected with skeptic thought, affected the same cultural environment. Considering the proximity of skepticism and sophistry, which has led them to cross paths in many times and ways since antiquity, it is highly possible that ancient sophists played some role in the Venetian area between the Cinquecento and Seicento beyond Speroni and Mazzoni.

Speroni argued for the rehabilitation of sophistry as a comprehensive approach to the human world, while Mazzoni focused on poetry as a kind of sophistry and classified sophists and skeptics in the same group of philosophers. Given the notoriety of these two Renaissance authors, it is hardly possible that their ideas remained isolated. On the contrary, they must have generated long-lasting debates among their contemporaries, thereby significantly influencing their intellectual world. Furthermore, Speroni and

²⁵⁶ E. Muir. *The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance. Skeptics, Libertines, and Opera*. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2007. 15-59.

Mazzoni shared the metaphor of poetry as an art of painting. The well-known Latin phrase *ut pictura poesis* was a *topos* initiated by Horace's *Ars poetica*, but they used it in an original way by connecting poetry with sophistry and skepticism. The final part of this chapter proposes an exploration of this connection within various authors and fields.

4. *Ut pictura poesis: Mazzoni, Speroni, Comanini*

Attracted by other aspects of his personality and *oeuvre*, scholars have neglected Speroni's discourse on poetics and poetry. A complete study of his theories and perspective would need much more space and attention than can be provided in this chapter, but one reference has to be mentioned to introduce this chapter's core. What is quoted below is the *incipit* of the *Sommario in difesa della casa del Petrarca* ("Summary in Defense of Petrarch's House"), a draft with personal notes for a possible oration that may actually have been declaimed. Speroni started by recalling the first argument that has to be presented, which is a praise of poetry:

Laudar prima la poesia una delle discipline liberali e che tegna del divino. Però gli antichi fanno i poeti sotto la tutela di Febo e delle Muse. Ed è adiutorio della rettorica, la quale dalla poesia toglie i numeri e la gentilezza delle parole. Ciceron fu poeta. Qui vedi Platone, Aristotele [...] Marsilio Ficino. In quanta riverenza fussero anticamente i poeti appare perché soli essi erano riputati sapienti. Tali

furono Museo, Orfeo, [...] Esiodo, ma innanzi tutti coloro Moisè e i suoi coetanei:
David, Salomone e colui che fece Job.²⁵⁷

Later in the text, Speroni claims “la poesia è cosa commune a’ filosofi” and “da uno stesso fonte [la poesia] nasce con la medicina, che Febo è medico e poeta.”²⁵⁸ Despite its lack of originality, Speroni’s discourse provides evidence of the author’s high esteem of poetry, which he conceives as a divine liberal art tightly connected to rhetoric. He claims that in antiquity poets were considered wise men, and he points out highly-esteemed popular mythological characters as well as biblical figures in the same fashion in which Marsilio Ficino built a chain of ancient sages (*theologi veteres*) in his *Platonic Theology* published in 1482 – as already discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation.

Speroni counted Dante Alighieri among the wisest poets of all time, even superior to Virgil. Sometime within the span of the first ten-year quarrel over Dante, Speroni wrote his two *Discorsi sopra Dante* (“Discourses on Dante”) to defend the Florentine poet from Belisario Bulgarini and the other “senesi” involved in the dispute. As the *Sommario in difesa della casa del Petrarca* quoted above, Speroni’s *Discorsi* are among the so-called *trattatelli* published for the first time in 1740 and do not provide, unfortunately, any hint that allows them to be dated with certainty. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether Mazzoni’s 1573 *Difesa* depends on Speroni’s *Discorsi* or vice-versa, although a letter that Mazzoni sent to Speroni in 1572 proves that the latter considered the former as an established authority whose guidance he wanted to follow in his philosophical investigation.

²⁵⁷ Speroni. *Opere*. V. 559.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 560.

In his letter, Mazzoni recalls that Speroni was willing to share his thoughts on the three thousand philosophical conclusions that he wrote with the intention of discussing them in a public meeting. At the time of the letter, Mazzoni had already started publishing his conclusions, but before proceeding, he wanted Speroni's advice on two specific issues. The first issue regards the correct place that rhetoric should have in the system of disciplines, while the second concerns the most suitable form of government.²⁵⁹ The letter does not mention the poetic debate that exploded during that same year. Given Mazzoni's high esteem of Speroni, one may suppose that his poetic theories were also affected by Speroni's ideas, but claiming a direct influence of Speroni's *Discorsi* on Mazzoni's *Difesa* is hardly sustainable. On the other hand, it would be possible to argue the opposite, since Mazzoni is quoted in Speroni's work along with other contemporaries, including Capponi, Castravilla, Castelvetro, Tomitano, Las Casas, and Bembo. In either case, Speroni's intervention in the debate on Dante has an important part in the recovery of the trope *ut pictura poesis* and its role in the Italian Renaissance of sophistry.

Speroni's first *Discorso sopra Dante* is a commentary on several passages of the *Comedy* and does not provide any particularly original insight, while the second *Discorso* presents an actual defense of Dante introduced by a polemical argument that states the futility of Bellisario Bugarini's attack:

Innanzi che io cominci a defender Dante dalle calunnie di chi biasima la sua Commedia, è ragionevole cosa che si consideri qual sia stata la intenzion sua in

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 355-356. On Mazzoni's letter see P. G. Fabbri. "La politeia di Jacopo Mazzoni." *Il pensiero politico* 22 (1989): 3-18. 16.

quella sua opra, e secondo che ella è buona o rea, e bene o male scritta, laudarlo o vituperarlo. La qual cosa se fusse stata considerata dal Bulgarini e da quelli altri che cominciarono a dirne male, ed onde si è fatto bello il sig. Bellisario, né elli indarno e con lor vergogna ne ragionavano, né io adesso mi metterei a parlarne.²⁶⁰

Speroni describes Bulgarini's attack as nonsense and accuses it of beginning a quarrel that should not have occurred. Like Mazzoni, Speroni considers Dante as the model for all poets and his *Comedy* as a masterpiece shaped in accordance with the rules of Aristotle. Indeed, Dante's poem has one subject and action; therefore, those who argue the opposite do so in vain, and Bulgarini behaves like a beast: "l poema di Dante ha un solo subietto e sola azione: cianci poi chi non lo 'ntende," and "il senese [i.e. Bulgarini] parla da bestia."²⁶¹

I do not aim to follow all the arguments of Speroni's second *Discorso*; instead I will focus on the passages addressing poetry as painting while highlighting the similarity with passages in other works of Speroni and his contemporaries.

In a passage that anticipates Tasso's theory of the poem as an artificial world created by an author, Speroni describes the poet as the ruler of his own creation, which creation is the result of an act of imitation using figures of speech. The ideal poet must have complete control on linguistic devices and strategies and must be knowledgeable enough in every field so he can easily disguise his art and deceive his reader.

²⁶⁰ Speroni, *Opere*. V. 504.

²⁶¹ Ibid. 515.

Poeta è sovrانىissimo nello imitare, imitando sempre o con le persone introdotte, le quali sempre fa parlare, o parlando egli stesso come poeta ed introduttore di esse persone, nelle quali parlando sempre imita, o con metafore, o con epiteti, o con comparazioni e similitudini da lui dette in tante maniere, che è una meraviglia, e dette in modi tali che uom non si avverte che siano similitudini: il ché è sommo artificio, come è sommo ingegno e sapere il trovarle perché ciò è da uomo che molto sappia e delle scienze e del mondo; del quale egli come esperto d'ogni cosa moderna e conoscitor delle istorie antiche, parla benissimo: conoscitor de' costumi de' principi, delle cittadi, e delle nazioni.²⁶²

This passage presents a portrait of the perfect poet reminiscent of the perfect orator as described in the Ciceronian *De Oratore*: a man who is able to speak on everything, especially topics related to ethics, customs, and political life. But Speroni goes further in connecting this to the ability of imitating and recreating a cosmos in words. The skillful poet, as an illusionist, leads the reader to forget the figures of speech actually employed in creating the poem. The so-called “sommo artificio” may suggest several ideas that Speroni, as a knowledgeable author, must have had as references: the Socratic irony in debating, the Horatian *mediocritas* in writing poems, Baldassarre Castiglione’s (1478-1529) *sprezzatura* in the social dimension, and Niccolò Machiavelli’s (1469-1527) dissimulation in leading political affairs. Like all of them, Speroni’s “sommo artificio” is a procedure which hides itself in order to be persuasive and therefore successful. In performing and presenting his fictional world as a natural creation, the poet has to assume

²⁶² Ibid. 509.

a variety of identities, as many as the characters that he introduces in his poem, so that the art of writing poems is also a sort of dramatic art as the author plays different roles on stage.

Descriptions and similitudes are the main tools utilized in creating a poem: “nella quali descrizioni e similitudini [l’autore] imita sì che si può dire che dipinga e scolpisca.”²⁶³ By deploying these tools, Dante makes possible the impossible in his *Comedy*, as in *Inferno* 13, in which Pier Delle Vigne is changed into a speaking tree, and in *Inferno* 26, in which Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro are presented as flames that are able to talk (to mention only two of the many examples found in the *Commedia*).

The theme of the poet as a master at imitating also appears later in the text:

solo dirò parlando della imitazione che ‘l poeta imita principalmente introducendo a parlare le persone che nel poema intravengono, e questa è imitazione principale, la quale usa Dante introducendo a parlare Virgilio, Stazio, Beatrice e se stesso, dando ad ognuna di queste persone il suo proprio officio nel suo poema: onde Dante nel suo poema abbia due officii, l’uno di poeta ed imitatore, l’altro di persona ed imitato, dipintore e dipinto.²⁶⁴

Speroni exploits the metaphor of painting to explain the multiplicity of characters in the *Comedy*. As is expected of an ideal poet, Dante introduces and plays a variety of characters, called *personae* in the Latin theater, and he acts as a painter of all of them. In Speroni’s evocative metaphor, Dante is simultaneously both the painter and the painting

²⁶³ Ibid. 509.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 516.

– the author and the work - as in the canvas of Diego Velázquez entitled *Las Meninas* in which the painter portrays himself as a character among others. If this painting marks the beginning of the modern awareness of the self in representing itself - as Michel Foucault suggested in his *Le mots et les choses* (1966) - then Speroni is stressing the modernity of Dante's poetry with remarkable insight.

Even when narrowing one's focus to the field of literary criticism, one can recognize Speroni's originality. In fact, if the core of his intuition is Dante as a creator and artifact at the same time, then Speroni anticipates twentieth-century scholarship that focuses on the unusual autobiographical style of the *Comedy* in the Middle Ages, when the public dimension prevails over the sphere of the self-conscious individual.²⁶⁵ The metaphor of the painter who represents himself in his work is an elegant trope for summarizing twentieth-century scholarship's conclusion regarding one of the most original aspects of the *Divine Comedy*.

Speroni's *Discorso* is connected to several passages on imitation and painting in other works that Speroni wrote before and after his defense of Dante. The most important ones are already examined in the previous chapters, but it bears recalling them briefly here.

In his *Dialogo della Discordia*, Jove uses the metaphor of a painting in order to instruct the goddess on how to make her arguments persuasive to the public. He suggests that the skillful orator, as a good painter, knows how to show his subject from the most convincing perspective, without regarding the truth.²⁶⁶ More expansively, the "pictural

²⁶⁵ See the related bibliography in A. Battistini and E. Raimondi. *Le figure della retorica*. Torino: Einaudi, 1984. 54-55.

²⁶⁶ Speroni. *Opere*. 64.

paradigm,” to employ the expression proposed in Malhomme’s article, is a leitmotif of the *Dialogo della retorica*, in which Speroni uses the metaphor of the orator as a painter to explain the power of rhetoric in producing persuasive images of the truth.²⁶⁷

Remarkably, both Speroni and Mazzoni employ the metaphor *ut pictura poesis* in a sense that goes beyond the Horatian *topos*, for poetry shares its features with dramatic art and oratory. In fact, all those arts perform verbally and create artificial worlds addressing an audience that has to be persuaded. As was shown previously in this chapter, Mazzoni interprets poetry as a pictorial art that uses fantasy as a tool, for poets are able to reproduce fantastic idols while crafting poems. To Speroni and Mazzoni, the term *poesia*, from the Latin *poesis*, is connected to the Aristotelian meaning of *poiesis* (production, composition) - from the verb *poiein* (to make, to craft) – as with the ability of creating artificial products, such as paintings, statues, speeches, and poems, that are not already present in the natural environment. As is well known, the Greek term *poiesis* has a broader meaning than the modern term ‘poetry’ and was not related to artistic creation as it has been understood since the Renaissance. Combining the Aristotelian *poiesis* with the Renaissance ennobled meaning of poetry, Speroni and Mazzoni extend the power of the poetic art perhaps further than any other early modern author.

The emphasis on the analogy of the poetic art with the pictorial art had important consequences. One example of these consequences emerges in the theory proposed by Gregorio Comanini in his dialogue *Il Figino, ovvero del fine della pittura* (“The Figino, or on the Purpose of Painting”) published in Mantova in 1591. Before analyzing the case of Comanini, one benefits from a brief return to Tasso’s *Discorsi del poema eroico*, in

²⁶⁷ F. Malhomme. “La rhétorique et les arts chez Sperone Speroni.” *Rhetoric* 29.2 (2011): 151-193.

which Tasso mentions Comanini along with Mazzoni and argues the distance of their common theory from Aristotelianism.²⁶⁸ According to Tasso, Comanini, excellent in eloquence and a friend of his, follows Mazzoni by considering the poet as an imitator of fantastic idols. Indeed, as Carlo Ossola and then Claudio Scarpati argued, Comanini applies to painting the ideas developed in the two defenses of Dante that Mazzoni published in 1573 and 1587, previously examined in this chapter.²⁶⁹

The *Figino* is a dialogue among three characters, Ambrogio Figino, Stefano Guazzo, and Ascanio Martinengo, who play respectively a poet, a painter, and a prelate. Guazzo defends the theory that art has pleasure as its goal, while Martinengo argues that art must instruct people in a moral sense, and Figino is a practitioner with a didactic tendency in his painting who offers comments from his point of view. Comanini's work is affected by the Counter-Reformation climate, but it also offers a plurality of perspectives that are not confined to the narrow path of Tridentine doctrine. The dialogue explores a variety of aesthetic issues related to imitation and pleasure with regard to both Platonic and Aristotelian tradition. Another major topic is the analogy of arts and games and the role of entertainment in social life. It is easy to recognize the influence of major sixteenth-century authors, including Castiglione, Tasso, and most of all Mazzoni, who is clearly the source of the discussion on the icastic versus fantastic imitation, a distinction that Mazzoni took from Plato's *Sophist*.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ T. Tasso. *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e del poema eroico*. Ed. L. Poma. Bari: Laterza, 1964. 90-91.

²⁶⁹ C. Scarpati. "Iacopo Mazzoni tra Tasso e Marino." *Aevum* 59 (1985): 433-458. 452-453; C. Ossola. *Autunno del Rinascimento. "Idea del Tempio" dell'arte nell'ultimo Cinquecento*. Firenze: Olschki, 1971. 100-111.

²⁷⁰ For an introduction to Comanini and his work, see *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento fra manierismo e controriforma*, vol. III. Ed. P. Barocchi. Bari: Laterza, 1962. 397-402. A. Pupillo Ferrari-Bravo. "Il Figino" del Comanini. *Teoria della pittura di fine '500*. Roma: Bulzoni editore, 1975. G. Comanini. *The Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting. Art Theory in the Late Renaissance*. Eds. A. Doyle-Anderson and

As scholars have highlighted, although the two types of imitation derive from Plato's *Sophist*, it was Mazzoni's *Difesa* of 1587 that inspired Comanini to emphasize the fantastic form of imitation, since this was not Plato's purpose.²⁷¹ According to Comanini, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who is often mentioned in the *Figino*, offers the most fitting example of a fantastic painter who imitates forms that exist only in his mind, such as his *capricci* in which Arcimboldo portrays the products of an original composition of vegetables and fruits. Besides this Cinquecento production, Comanini shows a particular connection with Marsilio Ficino and his syncretistic approach, which is evident in the parts of the dialogue dedicated to Neoplatonic themes such as love, demonology, and magic. Indeed, Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Sophist* played a major role in the discussion on the nature and function of idols.

In addressing the distinction between icastic and fantastic art and the related analogy between painting and poetry, Comanini compares diverse authors of different ages. First, Martinengo refers to Thomas Aquinas' distinction between simulacrum and idol in an attempt to clarify the terminological aspect of the dispute. He explains that the simulacrum is a representation of something that has existed, or that still exists; whereas an idol is an image that is not similar to anything that has ever existed:

il simulacro è qualche cosa e l'idolo non è alcuna cosa, essendo simulacro quella immagine la quale è fatta a similitudine di cosa stata, che mai sia stata, ovvero che

G. Maiorino. Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 2001. x-xxi.

²⁷¹ See Comanini. *The Figino*. xii.

sia; come sarebbe se altri ritrahesse il monstro descritto da Horatio nel principio dell'*Arte poetica*.²⁷²

The last quote is from the very beginning of Horatius' *Ars poetica* ("Poetic Art"), shortly preceding the formulation of the analogy between painting and poetry, and it offers an example of an idol, which would be the portrayal made by a painter who imitates the monster that Horace describes in the first verses of his work.

Martinengo's claim instigates Guazzo's response, wherein he proposes a different terminological setting relying on different sources. In fact, Guazzo states that he bases his argument on the terms proposed in Plato's *Sophist* and Ficino's commentary:

l'imitatione sappiamo essere di due sorti: una chiamata da lui [i.e. Plato] nel *Sofista* rassomigliatrice, overo icastica, e l'altra pur dal medesimo e nell'istesso dialogo, detta fantastica. La prima è quella che imita le cose le quali sono, la seconda è quella che finge cose non essistenti; e di questa, si come di quella, dice essere il proprio oggetto l'idolo, che simulacro è stato detto da Marsilio Ficino nella sua traslatione. Per l'autorità del qual Ficino voi vedete che ancora questa parola simulacro è generale e commune a significare imagine di cosa sussistente (concedetemi questa voce) e non sussistente altresì.²⁷³

²⁷² G. Comanini. *Figino, overo del fine della pittura*. Mantova: per Francesco Osanna, 1591. 27.

²⁷³ Ibid. 28-29. On this distinction, also see E. Panofsky. *Idea. A Concept in Art Theory*. Tr. J. J. S. Peake. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968. 215.

According to Guazzo, both types of simulacrum are appropriate to both painting and poetry, so that painters and poets who reproduce something formed by nature perform icastic imitation while those who create images on their own perform fantastic imitation. All of them deal with simulacra. To clarify the coexistence of the two types of art, Guazzo reports the major examples from Antiquity to his time. Virgil, Ariosto, and Tasso would be icastic poets when they represent Aeneas, Orlando, who really existed; however, when they write about Acate, Rodomonte, and Argante, the same poets should be called fantastic because they represent men who have no existence outside the mind:

Onde Virgilio nella persona di Enea, l'Ariosto nella persona d'Orlando, e l Tasso in quella di Goffredo, saranno poeti icastici come rappresentanti d'huomini che veramente sono stati; ma i medesimi nella persona d'Acate, di Rodomonte, e d'Argante, perché hanno finto huomini che mai non furono, poeti fantastici devono essere appellati e formatori d'idoli rappresentanti cose che non hanno l'essere fuori dalla mente.²⁷⁴

It results that the same poet may be both icastic and fantastic depending on the character he/she chooses to depict in verse.

Tasso, of course, must not have appreciated Comanini's interpretation of his *Gerusalemme liberata* as a hybrid product (half icastic and half fantastic). Still one ought to admit that Guazzo presents a very inclusive and tolerant definition of art - perhaps even too inclusive from a Counter-Reformation point of view.

²⁷⁴ Comanini. *Figino, ovvero del fine della pittura*. 29.

The analogy between pictorial and poetic art recurs later in the dialogue, when the discussion addresses the artist's ability to shape himself and his creations in different forms. Guazzo and Martinengo agree on this matter, which is related to sophistry because of the classical allegory employed here:

Gua. [...] Conosco esser vero che non meno al buon pittore che al buon poeta fa bisogno d'una certa universale letteratura con cui possa, a guisa d'un altro Proteo, trasformarsi in diverse forme e servirsi degli abiti altrui quanto ad imitator conviene.

Mar. Né io sono dal vostro parere discordante. Benché ostinatamente difendano alcuni il contrario e vogliano che infino al poeta non sia lecito far imitatione di cose scientifiche o d'arti. Onde ardiscono di biasimare non solo il Pontano, perché abbia in un suo poema cantato le cose del cielo, ma Virgilio ancora, che trattò dell'agricoltura nella *Georgica*.²⁷⁵

Proteus, the mythological protagonist of one of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is the key term of this exchange. This character is ambiguous because of the double meaning it acquired during the long span of time between antiquity and the Renaissance. On the one hand, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola made Proteus the allegory of the man who can become whatever he wants because he does not have a specific nature, so he is able either to reach God or fall into the darkness of the lowest world. Thus is the theory of the human being as a *magnum miraculum* that Pico argues in his never-performed speech now known as

²⁷⁵ Ibid. 48

De dignitate hominis ("On the Dignity of Man") (1487). On the other hand, Plato uses Proteus as a metaphor of a sophist who is able to imitate whatever he wants and pretends to be wise without actually possessing any knowledge. Speroni originally revised the two meanings and proposed a different version, a positive one rich in consequences. In his *Apologia dei dialoghi III*, as was discussed in chapter two, Proteus represents the poet as well as the rhetorician who is able to be a variety of *personae*, or characters, and to create a well-ordered world in which he assumes the identity most appropriate for the moment. In his *Discorso sopra Dante*, Speroni presents Dante as an excellent example of a painter who portrays the world of his poem as well as himself as a character in it. Indeed, Speroni's works suggest that poets and rhetoricians are similar not only to the mythological Proteus but also to the Platonic demiurge.

The two characters in Comanini's *Figino* support a position that avoids Pico's exaltation of the human being and overcomes Plato's condemnation of the sophist. Indeed, Comanini seems to depend on Speroni's version of the metaphorical meaning of Proteus. A further idea expressed by Guazzo and Martinengo agrees with what Speroni writes in his second *Discorso sopra Dante*. The two characters say that the poet ought to possess as broad a realm of knowledge as possible ("universal letteratura"), which is an essential condition for being a good imitator, although some critics would condemn this position and attack such a kind of poet, as is evident in the accusation against Giovanni Pontano's *Urania* and *Meteororum liber* as well as Virgil's poem on the agricultural life.

While the *topos* of the similarity between painting and poetry is strictly related to the larger debate on the value of Dante's poem, the same *topos* and debate are strongly affected by the rebirth of ancient sophistry in the vernacular works that started in some of

Speroni's earlier dialogues (published in 1542) and continued into some of his later works in the '70s. As a result, when Mazzoni and the other defenders of Dante responded to Ridolfo Castavilla, Belisario Bulgarini, and other detractors, their arguments benefited from the rediscovery of sophistic art. In these respects, the major lack of understanding in scholarly studies so far surrounds the fundamental role of Speroni's rehabilitation of sophists, which took place between Ficino's translation of Plato's dialogues and the controversial interpretation of poetry as a fantastic art in Mazzoni and his followers, such as Comanini. In fact, no study of Mazzoni's original theory has connected this segment of sixteenth-century literature with the Italian vernacular rebirth of sophistry.

There is one last aspect that has emerged several times throughout this dissertation and especially in the last part of this chapter: the long-lasting rejection of not-being as a dangerous dimension where elusiveness and transformation rule, possibly to the detriment of the human sphere, including social life and poetic art. We cannot even summarize the history of the opposition of being and not-being as two distinct dimensions, which started in the early Greek philosophy, but it is important to highlight that this dissertation has also aimed at demonstrating that Italian Renaissance literature plays a part in this history, a history that interestingly begins in the fifth century B.C., already across poetry and philosophical thought, with the fragmented verses of the poem *On Nature* of Parmenides of Elea. Indeed, Parmenides forbade travelling, metaphorically speaking, on the way of not-being, which cannot even be thought: "that [i.e. not-being], I point out to you, is a path wholly unthinkable, for neither could you know what-is-not (for that is impossible), nor could you point it out."²⁷⁶ Plato's *Sophist* and *Parmenides*

²⁷⁶ R. Waterfield, ed. *The First Philosophers. The Presocratics and the Sophists*. Oxford: Oxford University

stand as the paramount first attempt to overcome the rigidity of the rule established by Parmenides, while the allegory of the opposition of light (being) and darkness (not-being), posed in the poem *On Nature*, has always been presented as a major trope since Platonism until now; and literature makes no exception.

The opposition of being and not-being, truth and falsehood, or light and darkness re-emerges in the Renaissance also thanks to the rebirth of sophistry in the same age. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the sophistic art represented a valuable resource for rhetoric and poetry, but the fear of its dark side still remained. Tasso's refusal of the possibility of making poetry predicated on not-being, or falsehood, is quite explicit in this respect, since allowing the poet to write about non-existent things would suggest that the not-being can be imagined and said, with a consequent confusion between being and not-being, the true and the false, light and darkness. One can hear the echo of Parmenides' verses and their aftermath in the dialogue between the Segretario and Forestiero, the two characters of Tasso's *Apologia in difesa della Gerusalemme liberata* published in 1586:

Forestiero: Mi sovviene d'aver letto: quel che è e quello che non è ritrovarsi per tutte le cose congiunti insieme quasi con fibbie e con uncini: laonde di molte di quelle che diciamo non essere, non si può dire che non siano semplicemente; ma in qualche modo sono, in qualche modo non sono.

Segretario: Così stimo.

Forestiero: Ma l'invenzione è delle cose, in quanto elle sono, non in quanto elle

non sono.

Segretario: A mio parere.

Forestiero: Perché in quanto elle non sono, stanno ascose e ricoperte nelle tenebre e nella caligine di quel che non è: lì dove suol rifuggire il sofista, e circondarsi di molti argini e di molti ripari, perché sia malagevole il cavarnelo: e quivi suol ricercarle il poeta fantastico, il quale è l'istesso che 'l sofistico; ma ricercandone, è gran pericolo che perda se stesso. Però consiglierei ciascuno che più tosto dovesse cercarne nella luce e nello splendore di quel che è veramente.²⁷⁷

The Forestiero argues that although the relationship of being and not-being, connected with buckles and hooks (“con fibbie e con uncini”), is partially valid, poetry should not treat the not-being as its matter, and the poet should not lose himself in the dark land of shadows where the sophist lives, hiding his/her identity. Tasso’s position on poetry clearly results from a long-lasting philosophical dispute that dates to antiquity, and it testifies to the ancient roots of an important literary debate during the Italian Renaissance.

²⁷⁷ T. Tasso. “Apologia in difesa della Gerusalemme liberata.” Id. *Prose diverse*. Ed. C. Guasti. Vol. I. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1875. 334-335.

Conclusions and possible aftermath

According to Speroni, the human world is a place in which rhetoric plays a central role in coordinating and guiding citizens toward the common good. This focus on the unstable world of human affairs not only stands in opposition to Plato's political model but also evokes the division between the two archetypical cities in Augustine of Hippo's (354-430) *De Civitate Dei*. Inverting Augustine's perspective on the antagonistic relationship between the human and metaphysical sphere, Speroni gives to the "city of men" an undeniable value independent of any kind of metaphysical or religious point of view. According to Speroni's argument, there is no place for essences and Platonic ideas in public and political life, and it is unreasonable to judge earthly values from a metaphysical sphere. If political and civil life depend on opinions, compromises, and changeable values, then sophistic rhetoric is the most appropriate practice to create the best public life for each particular community.

Although fifteenth-century authors engaged in the broad work of translation and interpretation of the ancient sophistic tradition, Speroni's project was the very first attempt in the Italian Renaissance to explicitly suggest that sophistic rhetoric and cultural perspective deserved a central role at his time. Furthermore, it was the first time in Europe that an author had proposed a sophistic Renaissance in vernacular with the specific objective of reaching a broader public. In Italy, the vernacular debate over sophistry spread among Mazzoni, Tasso and the other actual and virtual interlocutors after the publication and diffusion of Speroni's works: his dialogues - published in 1542 - *trattatelli*, and *Apologia dei dialoghi*. The exploration conducted in this dissertation has not only brought to the surface the originality of Speroni's discourse on sophistic arts, but

has also connected all parts of the Italian sophistic Renaissance, spanning two centuries, first in Latin and then in Italian, for the first time.

None of the scholarly traditions on either side of the Atlantic have considered the relevance of the impact of sophists on early modern philosophy and literature, from Leonardo Bruni to Torquato Tasso. Even Eugenio Garin and Paul Oskar Kristeller, two of the most productive scholars, did not present the early modern sophistic rebirth as a subject deserving specific attention. One might wonder what accounts for this lack in the field of Renaissance Studies. Two precedents might be quoted. The first is the modern discovery of Hermeticism as a central strain in the early-modern era, thanks to the works of Eugenio Garin, Aby Warburg, and Frances Yates. The second, much more recent, is the discovery of the massive presence of a vernacular Aristotelianism on which international teams in the UK and Italy are currently working.²⁷⁸ In both cases, a prejudice has prevented international scholarship from perceiving the significance of these cultural phenomena. In the first case, before the twentieth-century attempt to recover the hermetic tradition, no scholar would have imagined that the hermetic texts, considered obscure, confused, and of uncertain origin, could have played an important role in the Renaissance, seen as this movement was as a preparation for the modern Enlightenment. In the second case, before the recent international projects on Aristotle in the Italian vernacular, scholars had considered Greek and Latin the only languages in

²⁷⁸ See the project *Vernacular Aristotelianism in Renaissance Italy, c. 1400-c. 1650* that ran from 2010 to 2013 at the University of Warwick (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/projects/vernaculararistotelianism/>) and the ERC Starting Grant project *Aristotle in the Italian Vernacular: Rethinking Renaissance and Early-Modern Intellectual History (c. 1400–c. 1650)* that is running from 2014 to 2019 and based at Ca' Foscari University in Venice (Italy) (<http://aristotleinthevernacular.org>).

which Aristotelianism could carry original ideas and had not considered worth studying the vernacular translation of Aristotelian works.

I believe that the results of this project will impact Renaissance scholarship in several respects. First, the discovery of a sophistic presence in the Renaissance will broaden our vision of the variety of traditions available at that time. Furthermore, it enriches the portrayal of the early-modern era that scholars, until now, have constructed. The Renaissance, thus, emerges as a unique moment in the history of Western thought, when a plurality of cultural traditions was not only reborn in the medium of the vernacular language but also culturally translated and interpreted in original ways. This dissertation has aspired to argue that sophistry – or a plurality of sophistic perspectives – must be considered to be a major factor in Renaissance culture along with Platonism, Hermeticism, Aristotelianism, and skepticism. If MacPhail's book began uncovering the sophistic Renaissance, mostly in Latin literature and French culture, this dissertation draws attention to the Italian world, where the Renaissance was born. It should be noted that this dissertation represents a beginning rather than a completion of study on the subject. Part of the research vectors for deepening and broadening this investigation are already visible and can be briefly drafted. In the following pages, I would like to suggest the paths of research that I consider among the most interesting and promising.

An issue that needs to be deepened is the difference between Latin and vernacular production on sophistry in Europe. Indeed, the vernacular writing aimed to share the new literature with the middle class, beyond the academic environment. It would be important to verify not only how the key philosophical terms of the sophistic movement were translated into the vernacular but also what vernacular expressions were adopted or

invented to express specific concepts and how arguing them in the vernacular might have inspired original ideas. Furthermore, the ways in which this linguistic process overlapped with the development of other traditions in the vernacular, mostly Platonism and Aristotelianism, but also skepticism, should be addressed. The complex and changeable linguistic setting, which was Renaissance Italy, where different vernacular languages competed for supremacy, should also be considered as a major factor in further research.

Beyond linguistic concerns, it may be fruitful to research contemporary Italian literary production in Latin. Gerolamo Cardano is the most relevant example for engagement in the rebirth of ancient sophistry in Latin Renaissance literature. At least two of his works are relevant for the subject: the *Neronis encomium* (“Praise of Nero”) published in 1562 and *Antigorgias dialogus sive de recta vivendi ratione* (“Anti-Gorgias, or On the Right Way to Live”) published in 1566.²⁷⁹ Both of them, but especially the latter, show how much Cardano’s discourse relates to the ancient dispute between Socratic-Platonic philosophy and the culture of sophists. It is a matter of fact that Speroni and Cardano shared the same cultural environment in Padua, Bologna, and Rome in roughly the same years. Cardano’s interest in Gorgias and sophistry may be independent from Speroni’s rediscovery of sophistic rhetoric or vice-versa. In either case, comparing the two authors would shed light on the differences between two contemporaries writing on the same subject from different perspectives.

Another path open for further research is on the legacy of Speroni’s works and the rebirth of sophistry between the late Renaissance and the Baroque era. As mentioned in

²⁷⁹ On rhetoric in Cardano, see G. Giglioni. “The Many Rhetorical Personae of an Early Modern Physician: Girolamo Cardano on Truth and Persuasion.” *Rhetoric and Medicine in Early Modern Europe*. Eds. S. Pender and N. S. Struve. Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.173-193.

chapter four, Claudio Scarpati suggested a nexus between the literary debate of the second half of the sixteenth century and the poetry and poetics of Giambattista Marino (1569-1625).²⁸⁰ One could argue that the Baroque as a culture of appearance and formal virtuosity could easily have found in sophistry a powerful ally and somehow also a philosophical foundation. Assuming the legitimacy of such a research direction, one may raise the following questions: how much of the sophistic Renaissance did Baroque culture inherit? Would it be possible to interpret Baroque poetics and poetry as a modern variation of a sophistic rhetoric? Does the prevalence of linguistic experimentation with new rhetorical devices imply the legacy of Gorgias' *Praise of Helen*?

The possible reciprocal influence of the debate over sophistry between Italy and the rest of Europe in the early-modern era is also a matter for further research. There is evidence that French literature had a part in the sophistic Renaissance. MacPhail has argued that Michel de Montaigne's (1533-1592) writings are most closely related to sophistic rhetoric, making him an important figure in these respects. According to MacPhail, Montaigne uses rhetorical means to destroy rhetoric, so that Montaigne's "essay is the modern form of rhetoric best adapted to weakening, and thus to strengthening rhetoric," and finally "the essay [...] is a sophistic form, and Montaigne is the champion of the Sophistic Renaissance."²⁸¹ Furthermore, the typical relativistic and pluralistic tendency in Montaigne's *Essays* confirms a proximity to the ancient sophists' approach.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ C. Scarpati. "Iacopo Mazzoni tra Tasso e Marino." *Aevum* 59 (1985): 433-458. 456-458.

²⁸¹ E. MacPhail. *The Sophistic Renaissance*. Genève: Droz, 2011. 71, 92.

²⁸² Ibid. 94-103.

One could also address the relationship between Speroni and the European authors who were particularly connected to the Italian Renaissance culture. In chapter three, I argued not only for the possible influence of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* on Speroni's *Dialogo della Discordia* but also for the original aspects that make the latter unique in the history of Western philosophy and literature. Further research should aim to explore other possible parallels or influences across European borders, first in sixteenth-century French culture.

Scholars have argued that Speroni's *Dialogo delle lingue* (1542), especially where he defends the vernacular as a language exchangeable for Latin in conveying cultural content, was a model for Joachim Du Bellay's *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise* (1549).²⁸³ Speroni's *oeuvre* may also have influenced other sixteenth-century French authors. A comparative study of Speroni and Michel de Montaigne seems particularly promising. For example, Speroni's *Dialogo della Discordia* could have been a major source of inspiration for Montaigne's *De l'art de conferer* – published in the third book of his *Essais* – which argues the positive effect of discord in education and self-development.²⁸⁴

Dorothea B. Heitsch's interpretation of Montaigne's *De l'art de conferer* has shed light on a particular point that is worthy of discussion here.²⁸⁵ Heitsch underlines the significance of images of competition and *agon* in Montaigne's work, which "turns the

²⁸³ See P. Villey. *Les sources italiennes de la Deffence et illustration de Joachim du Bellay*. Paris: Champion, 1908; I. Navarrete. "Strategies of Appropriation in Speroni and Du Bellay." *Comparative Literature* 41 (1989): 141-154; J. Trabant. "Noch einmal über Du Bellay und Speroni." *Renaissance - Episteme und Agon: Für Klaus W. Hempfer anlässlich seines 60. Geburtstages*. Eds. Edited A. Kablitz, Edited by G. Regn. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2006. 239-256.

²⁸⁴ A parallelism between the intellectual approach of Speroni and Montaigne is suggested in P. De Capitani. "De l'art de persuader à l'art de bien juger et de bien dire: la rhétorique chez Sperone Speroni." *Cahiers d'études italiennes* 2 (2005): 131-159.

²⁸⁵ D. B. Heitsch. "Nietzsche and Montaigne: Concepts of style." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 17 (1999): 411-431.

essay into an arena of intellectual experience.”²⁸⁶ Indeed, Montaigne displays passion for *agon* when he defends discussion as the most fruitful exercise for the mind and notes that “the Athenians, and the Romans too, preserved this practice in great honor in their academies. In our time, the Italians retain some vestiges of it, to their great advantage, as is seen by a comparison of our intelligence with theirs.”²⁸⁷ Montaigne’s praise of the Italians could have been inspired by several literary examples, from Colluccio Salutati’s praise of “disputatio” in the first dialogue of Leonardo Bruni’s *Dialogi ad Petrum Histrum* to Sperone Speroni’s *Dialoghi* published in 1542, and Stefano Guazzo’s *Civile conversazione*, published in 1574.²⁸⁸ Furthermore, Montaigne possibly had the chance to experience the Italian practice of dialogue in his voyage in Italy in 1580-1581. According to his *The Journal of the Journey to Italy*, he visited Padua and Venice in November 1580.²⁸⁹ In the very same year, Speroni was in Padua and already well-known in the Venetian as well as Roman intellectual environment. Despite the fact that Montaigne does not mention any encounter with Speroni or others figures of his *milieu*, one could imagine that he left those places with at least some acquaintance with Speroni’s works. If the third book of his *Essais*, written after his voyage, is also the result of his experience in Italy, then it is possible that Speroni’s influence played a role in it.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 430.

²⁸⁷ M. de Montaigne. *Essays III*. Id. *The Complete works*. Eds. D. M. Frame and S. Hampshire. New York and Toronto: A. A. Knopf, 2003. 855. “Les Atheniens, et encore les Romains, conservoient en grand honneur cet exercice en leur Academies. De nostre temps, les Italiens en retiennent quelques vestiges, à leur grand profit, comme il se voit par la comparaison de nos entendemens aux leurs” (M. de Montaigne. *Les Essais III*. Ed. P. Villey. Paris: PUF, 1924. 922-923).

²⁸⁸ J. Balsamo. “La conversation dans la “Librairie”: Montaigne et quelques italiens.” *Dialogo & conversazione. I luoghi di una socialità ideale dal Rinascimento all’Illuminismo*. Eds. M. H. Andersen and A. Toftgaard. Firenze: Olschki, 2012. 61-77. On the value of debating, particularly in scholastic authors, see the recent study of A. J. Novikoff. *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

²⁸⁹ M. de Montaigne. *Journal de voyage*. Ed. Fausta Garavini. Paris: Gallimard, 1983. 160-166.

The practice of dialogue has had an important role in the development of Western culture since antiquity and is detectable in several forms throughout the Renaissance; nevertheless, the practice of praising discord seems to be a more specific and rare literary genre. As we discuss in chapter three, except for the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, I am not aware of another explicit defense of discord in Western literature before Speroni's *Dialogo della Discordia*.

Montaigne and Speroni seem to share the same passion for debate, conceived as an *agon* where discord helps in achieving excellent results. There is evidence of this in a passage from the *De l'art de conferer* in which Montaigne compares the dullness of reading books and the stimulation of discussion with worthy interlocutors: "if I discuss with a strong mind and a stiff jouster, he presses on my flanks, prods my right and left; his ideas launch mine. Rivalry, glory, competition push me and lift me above myself. And union is an altogether boring quality in discussion".²⁹⁰ Montaigne proposes metaphors of strife and love in order to clarify what he means:

I like a strong manly fellowship and familiarity, a friendship that delights in the sharpness and vigor of its intercourse, as does love in bites and scratches that draw blood. It is not vigorous and generous enough if it is not quarrelsome, if it is civilized and artful, if it fears knocks and moves with constraint.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Montaigne. *Essays III*. 855. "Si je confere avec une ame forte et un roide jouster, il me presse les flancs, me pique à gauche et à dextre, ses imaginations eslancent les miennes. La jalousie, la gloire, la contention me poussent et rehaussent au dessus de moy-mesmes. Et l'unisson est qualité du tout ennuyeuse en la conference" (Montaigne. *Les Essais III*. 923).

²⁹¹ Montaigne. *Essays III*. 856. "J'ayme une société et familiarité forte e virile, une amitié qui se flatte en l'aspreté et vigueur de son commerce, comme l'amour, es morsures et esgratigneures sanglantes. Elle n'est pas assez vigoureuse et genereuse, si elle n'est querelleuse, si elle est civilisée et artiste, si elle craint le hurt et a ses allures contraintes" (Montaigne. *Les Essais III*. 924).

This praise of discord as a means of improving intellectual life may have been borrowed from Speroni's *Dialogo della Discordia*, or the two works may have evolved independently towards a similar conclusion. In either case, a comparative study addressing the subject may uncover that the agonistic culture of ancient Greece, traditionally animated by the verbal competition between sophists, is a common source for Montaigne and Speroni.

Although the connection between Speroni's works and France is the most promising for future research, one cannot exclude the possible influence of the Italian rebirth of sophistry in other parts of Europe. Heinrich Merkl's recent book on Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) as an anti-sophist actually opens a new path of research on the diffusion of literature on sophistry in early-modern Spain.²⁹² Merkl argues that Cervantes knew about sophistry from either Ficino's translation and commentaries on Plato's dialogues or different sources and that his *Quijotes* engage sophistry even if not explicitly. Merkl aims at demonstrating how Cervantes had an important part in the history of ideas, even while he criticizes and refuses sophistic perspectives.

Also, modern Spanish scholarship has expressed interest in the subject. A most famous case is philosopher Fernando Savater's book *Apologia del sofista y otros sofismas*.²⁹³ The book collects different essays written between 1969 and 1973, and although only the first two writings are explicitly dedicated to sophistry, Savater

²⁹² H. Merkl. *Cervantes anti-sofista: sobre Platón, Ficino, y los tres Quijotes, 1605, 1614 y 1615*. Pontevedra: Editorial Academia del Hispanismo, 2011. See also H. Merkl. "Cervantes, Protágoras y la Postmodernidad. El 'Quijote' de 1605 y algunos diálogos de Platón." *Anuario de Estudios Cervantinos* 1 (2004): 139-147.

²⁹³ F. Savater. *Apologia del sofista y otros sofismas*. Madrid: Taurus, 1973.

introduces his volume by announcing that his main subject will be the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. Savater's inclination toward the consideration of philosophy as a literary genre is claimed at the very beginning and confirmed throughout the book. In discussing the matter, Savater takes into serious consideration one of the most interesting of Nietzsche's ideas: philosophy has found in rhetoric an enemy and an ally at the same time. In fact, Savater takes for granted the following Nietzschean argument: despite the fact that philosophy – in Plato's definition of it – was born to reject the sophistic art, no philosophy – especially Platonism – would have been possible without rhetorical means of expression.²⁹⁴ One may notice that at the core of Speroni's thinking there is a similar argument: in the attempt to destroy sophistry, Plato unveils himself as the worst sophist.

Are Cervantes and Savater only isolated cases in the history of Spanish culture or just the most evident representatives of a broader, ongoing discourse on the value of sophistry in early modern and modern Spain? Expanding research into other Spanish authors and works may uncover additional significant cases of literature engaged with sophistic subjects and perhaps further connections between Spanish and Italian intellectual environments throughout history.

What about the legacy of the recovery of sophistry in Germany? In the nineteenth century, German culture expressed an interest in the sophistic movement. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) is one of the most relevant cases in this respect. In 1851, Schopenhauer published a collection of philosophical reflections entitled *Parerga and Paralipomena*, in which he included his *Art of always Being Right*, gathering 38

²⁹⁴ Ibid. 9.

stratagems to win an argument. Far from being simply a sarcastic exercise, this work in fact implies a specific *Weltanschauung* in which persuasion becomes the primary strength of any kind of argument in any field, implying a renunciation of reaching any truth or stable understanding of reality. In his work, Schopenhauer reduces all kind of argumentation to a rhetorical device for winning the interlocutor in a dialectical *agon*. Truth is not an objective anymore, and all the attention is dedicated to persuading instead of demonstrating. Overcoming Plato's condemnation as well as Aristotle's criticism of sophistry, Schopenhauer rehabilitates the sophistic attitude toward knowledge.

If Schopenhauer is the first German thinker who seems to be strongly influenced by the sophistic tradition, Friedrich Nietzsche is certainly the most significant as well as most complex case to be considered.

Part of Nietzsche's perspective is already present in Speroni's defense of sophists and his condemnation of the Socratic and Platonic point of view discussed in chapter two. In order to appreciate this similarity, we should briefly recall Nietzsche's interest in ancient sophists. According to Scott Consigny, who provided a close reading of the 1872 essay *Homer's Contest*, the 1873 notes for the book *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, and other works of Nietzsche on the same subject, the ancient sophists' rhetorical art strongly affected the German philosopher.²⁹⁵ Nietzsche considered Protagoras and Gorgias the last representatives of the ancient 'healthy' Greek agonistic culture, because of their taste for competition, in which all aspects of life, even the most painful, are accepted and enthusiastically embraced. According to Nietzsche, the sophists prefigure his anti-metaphysical perspective in their refusal of any absolute truth. They were artists

²⁹⁵ S. Consigny. "Nietzsche's Reading of the Sophists." *Rhetoric Review* 13 (1994): 5-26.

able to create persuasive speeches through a surprising control of the linguistic means and stand against any Socratic and Platonic tyrannical philosophy. It would be worth exploring if this recovery was partially related to Nietzsche's enthusiasm for the Renaissance, nourished by his intellectual relation with the historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897). Indeed, when the young Nietzsche joined the University of Basel, Burckhardt was an established scholar who had already published *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). Furthermore, from 1872 to 1886 Burckhardt taught a very popular course on ancient Greece for which he had kept gathering notes for the manuscript of his *The Cultural History of Greece* – eventually published in four volumes in 1898-1902 – a work that surprisingly points out the misleading judgment on sophists due to the overestimated Platonic condemnation of them. As Lionel Gossman demonstrated in his book *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, Burckhardt anticipated several aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy through both works mentioned above.²⁹⁶ One wonders if Burckhardt's expertise in ancient Greece as well as the Italian Renaissance along with his heterodox perspective on ancient sophists is somehow related to Nietzsche's recovery of the sophistic culture against the Platonic metaphysics.

Remarkably, there is one specific element that Speroni and Nietzsche share and that makes them unique cases in the Renaissance and modern Europe respectively: their attacking Socrates for being mostly harmful to the Greek culture. This becomes even more striking when one considers that Socrates has been commonly considered a positive figure, spiritual guide, philosophical model, and even a Pagan anticipation of Christ. Both Speroni and Nietzsche inverted the common opinion and considered Socrates responsible

²⁹⁶ See L. Gossman. *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt. A study in Unseasonable Ideas*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. 297-346 (for Burckhardt's opinion on sophists, see 339-340).

for poisoning the source of Western culture with his thought and practice. In chapter two of this dissertation, we analyzed Speroni's *Contra Socrate*, in which two arguments are particularly close to Nietzsche's position. First, Socrates actually misled Athens's citizens by introducing the concept of essence in moral discussion. Second, his thinking was so twisted that it also affected his body, shaped more as a beast than a human being. According to Pierre Hadot, Nietzsche's intellectual engagement with Socrates is complex and not always so easy to retrace.²⁹⁷ Nevertheless, I argue that one can clearly find along Nietzsche's philosophical path the same type of arguments presented in Speroni's *Contra Socrate*. This is particularly evident in Nietzsche's writing about Socrates and the Greek tragedy, published as a part of his *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, in which the German philosopher highlights the pernicious effect of Socrates' dialectics on Greek culture and argues that his uncommon ugliness reflected the monstrosity of his philosophy. A study of the similarity between Speroni and Nietzsche may not only contribute to understanding the legacy of the sophistic Renaissance but also to deepening the influence of the Italian Renaissance on one of the most revolutionary thinkers of the modern era.

In recent years, Italian philosophy has shown a capacity for looking at its background and finding distinctive features in order to stress its unique contribution to Western culture, finding a specific strength in its own history. The most recent tendency in this direction is the "pensiero vivente" ("living thought"), recently proposed by Roberto Esposito.²⁹⁸ Esposito's perspective intersects interestingly with this dissertation.

²⁹⁷ P. Hadot. *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Editions Albin Michel: Paris 2002.

²⁹⁸ See R. Esposito. *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*. Torino: Einaudi, 2010. (*Living Thought. The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*. Trans. Z. Hanafi. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

According to Esposito, Italian thinkers, who have always lived in a changeable geopolitical climate, have been forced to develop both a flexibility in thinking to avoid any rigid philosophical system as well as a specific lexicon. From the fourteenth century to the “pensiero debole” (“weak thought”) of Gianni Vattimo, Italian philosophy has been characterized by a unique supremacy in Western culture. Indeed, philosophy ‘made in Italy’ is able to deal with praxis, avoid metaphysics and any rigid structure, engage contemporary political life, welcome plurality of perspectives, and intersect with different disciplines.

According to Esposito, the originality of Italian thought stems from a specific historical and geographical context, the Italian peninsula, for centuries divided into regional states, and even city states, with different styles of life, ethical and political theories and habits. Italian philosophy was born on an unstable, changeable, volcanic land and, metaphorically speaking, embodies these features. The span of time between Dante and Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) is particularly rich for the variety and quality of philosophical literature. Nevertheless, one cannot find a solid, long-lasting medieval and early modern tradition, but rather a plurality of styles of thought, often unconnected and expressed in very different vernaculars. At the same time, this multiplicity determines the weaknesses and strengths of Italian philosophy. It is weak from the point of view of systematic philosophies, for example Kantianism or Idealism, but it is also strong because of its capacity to provide the most appropriate intellectual and argumentative tools for dealing with the challenges of our time. To represent his theory,

Esposito chooses Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) painting *Battle of Anghiari*, in which a tangled scene of horses and men offers a fair allegory of "living thought."²⁹⁹

It is not my intention to deepen any specific aspect of Esposito's theory but rather to point out two tendencies that characterize his work in general. On the one hand, Esposito's argument is extremely interesting for his historical and theoretical analysis of the peculiarities of Italian philosophy, and it actually prepares the field for further fruitful discussions within Italian Studies. On the other hand, Esposito's book lacks exploration of early modern authors and movements that have yet to be studied. There is no effort to promote the lesser known or unknown authors and thoughts that would confirm and strengthen his argument. In fact, he refers only to the very well-known classics of the period. Machiavelli, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Vico, are among the most frequently quoted. In other terms, one would expect a deeper contribution in terms of a recovery of unexplored traditions that would support the theory, especially for the time period, the Renaissance, during which, as Esposito's book claims, Italian philosophy built its unique identity. The sophistic rebirth of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy is probably the most fitting tradition for Esposito's conception of "living thought." *Agon*, mobility, flexibility, relativism, pluralism, and an anti-systematic approach to life are at the same time the core of the so-called "living thought" and the main features of ancient as well as early modern sophistry.

As I write these conclusions, a new work on sophistry written by Barbara Cassin is being published in the US.³⁰⁰ Without any intention of discussing the content of this

²⁹⁹ See Esposito. *Living Thought*. 84

³⁰⁰ B. Cassin. *Sophistical Practice. Towards a Consistent Relativism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

work, it is worth pointing out that this book confirms the current international interest in the richness of the sophistic approach as well as in addressing sophists as not only great historical figures but also valuable thinkers for interpreting the modern-day philosophical issues. Cassin's book contributes to the scholarly discussion on the relationship between the sophistic tradition and current cultural debate.

The recent international attention paid to sophistry indicates the need to recover a form of thought that can respond to questions that concern our world better than any metaphysical or systematic thought. Richard Rorty summed up most clearly what he believes should be the future of Western culture, in which sophists would have a central role:

Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality. So we shall not see a difference in kind between "necessary" and "contingent" truths. At most, we shall see differences in degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs. We shall, in short, be where the Sophists were before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented "philosophical thinking": we shall be looking for an airtight case rather than an unshakable foundation.³⁰¹

How much of this cultural project was a part of the Italian Renaissance without any awareness on the part of modern and post-modern scholarship? To what extent did Renaissance culture anticipate modern and post-modern discourses on a new anti-

³⁰¹ R. Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. 157.

metaphysical philosophical path with an originality that was beyond what we have expected so far? This dissertation has also aimed to contribute to answering these questions through an investigation across the history of literature and philosophy. I believe that my research project may play a role in the recovery of what Christopher Celenza has called the *lost Italian Renaissance*, although from my perspective the “lost” part includes both Latin and vernacular literature in the span of time between Leonardo Bruni and Jacopo Mazzoni.³⁰²

The Italian Renaissance, as an age of pioneering re-evaluation of ancient sophists and exploitation of their philosophical and literary potentialities, may have a central place in a revised history of Western culture. In fact, although the current call for a flexible and pluralistic approach to our world is a post-modern condition, the most valuable responses may lie in the pre-modern era and its interpretation of ancient authors.

The capacity to face present challenges depends also on scholars’ work on our cultural roots. This dissertation aims to provide a substantial contribution in this direction. I like to imagine my work as an *anceps opus* – a double-headed work – which looks at the treasures of Renaissance literature while connecting cultural history to present discussions across disciplinary boundaries.

³⁰² Ch. S. Celenza. *The Lost Italian Renaissance. Humanists, Historians, and Latin’s Legacy*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 2004. An Italian version is now published: *Il Rinascimento perduto. La letteratura latina nella cultura italiana del Quattrocento*. Carocci: Roma, 2014. For a discussion on the place of Renaissance in the history of philosophy, see Ch. S. Celenza. “Lorenzo Valla and the Traditions and Transmissions of Philosophy.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66.4 (2005). 483-506; and Id. “What Counted as Philosophy in the Italian Renaissance? The History of Philosophy, the History of Science, and Styles of Life.” *Critical Inquiry* 39.2 (2013): 367-401.

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Dottorato di Ricerca (the Ph.D. degree in Italy), Philosophy and Theory of the Human Sciences, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Dipartimento di Filosofia, April 22, 2004

Dissertation: *Marsilio Ficino e la peste: teoria e prassi di un sapere medico filosofico. Con la trascrizione del Consilio contro la pestilentia (Firenze 1481)*. Advisors: Prof. Germana E. Ernst, Prof. Sebastiano Gentile.

Teaching Certification, Ministry of Education, University and Research, Italy, 2001
Recipient of a national award granted through a highly competitive process for selecting high school teachers for full-time permanent positions in Philosophy, History, Pedagogy, Psychology.

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Two-session seminar on the Divine Comedy as a part of prof. Pier Massimo Forni's pedagogical course on the teaching of Dante to American undergraduates (*Dante's Inferno: A Reading for Teaching*. Spring 2011).

Invited Lecturer, University of Warsaw (Poland), November 22nd, 2013
One-session class on the Platonic Academy of Florence in the course *Culture in Print in 16th Century Europe* held by prof. Valentina Lepri in The Interdisciplinary Research Faculty of "Artes Liberales".

Invited Lecturer, Accademia dei Desiderosi (Rome, Italy), 2009-2010
Lectures: *Interpretazioni di Mussolini e del fascismo. La storia per immagini: illustrazioni e foto dall'Italia del primo Novecento. Il dibattito tra interventisti e neutralisti all'inizio della Grande Guerra: i futuristi, D'Annunzio, Mussolini, Giolitti. Bergson e l'esperienza artistica.*

Full-time Teacher, Liceo F. Enriques (Rome, Italy), 2007-2010
History from Middle Ages to the 20th century
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Part-time Teacher, several high schools (Rome, Italy), 2005-2007.

Teaching Assistant, Università degli Studi Roma Tre (Italy), 2003
Seminar on Marsilio Ficino and Neo-Platonism as part of prof. G. Ernst's course on History of Renaissance Philosophy.

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Refresher courses on computers and teaching methodology for secondary school teachers.

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Course taught: *Rome as told by its Narrators: A Journey through History, Literature, Arts and Film* (Fall 2013).

Singleton Travel Fellowship, C. Singleton Center for the Study of Pre-Modern Europe, Johns Hopkins University, 2012 and 2014
Research on early editions of Sperone Speroni's works in Italian libraries.

Post-doctoral fellowship, Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici (Naples, Italy), 2006
Research on Tommaso Campanella's epistolary in collaboration with prof. G. Ernst.

Post-doctoral fellowship, Fondazione Luigi Firpo – Centro di Studi sul Pensiero Politico (Turin, Italy), 2005.

Research on the legacy of Platonism in the age of the Counter-Reformation.

Participant in a two-year research, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2002-2003
Title: *Natura e civilitas. Ricerche su testi di Bruno e Campanella e la prospettiva enciclopedica della tradizione filosofica rinascimentale*, supervisor prof. G. Ernst.

Participant in a one-year research, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2002
Title: *Natura e civilitas. Ricerche su testi di Bruno e Campanella e la prospettiva enciclopedica della tradizione filosofica rinascimentale*, supervisor prof. G. Ernst.
The research was part of a broader research of national interest supervised by prof. G. Paganini (Università di Vercelli) titled *Natura e civilitas. Testi e studi sulla filosofia della natura e il pensiero etico politico del Rinascimento*.

Participant in a two-year research, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2000-2001
Title: *Aetas bruniana e campanelliana. La tradizione filosofica del Rinascimento e le sue fonti*, supervisor prof. G. Ernst.

Grant “Progetto Giovani Ricercatori”, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 1999
Bibliographical research on Marsilio Ficino and his works.

Erasmus Program Grant, University Paris X-Nanterre (France), January-July 1996
Certification of History of Philosophy and French language exams passed.

- **Organization of scientific Meetings**

27-29 March 2014. Panel: *Renaissance Agon*. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America, New York City, NY. Organizer: T. Katinis, chair: Ch. S. Celenza, respondent: P. Ugolini, sponsor: History of the Classical Tradition discipline

4-6 April 2013. Panel: *Rhetoric, Politics, and Ethics in the Italian Renaissance*. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America, San Diego, CA. Organizer: T. Katinis, chair: Ch. S. Celenza, respondent: J. Monfasani, sponsor: Charles Singleton Center for the Study of Pre-Modern Europe

- **University Service for Students**

Johns Hopkins University, 2011-2013
Reference for student applications

Johns Hopkins University, Italian Club, April 4, 2012
Seminar of Italian literature for undergraduate students

- **Professional Service**

Editorial Secretary and Collaborator of the journal “Bruniana & Campanelliana. Ricerche filosofiche e materiali storico-testuali” (directed by E. Canone and G. Ernst), 2003-present

Co-Editor of *Il filo di Arianna: studiamo e costruiamo ipertesti insieme*, 2000, CD Rom winner of the competition “100 prodotti multimediali per la scuola” and funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (Italy), 1999

- **Languages**

Italian (native); English (fluent); French (fluent); Spanish, German, and Latin (reading)

- **Memberships**

Modern Language Association (2013-present)

The Renaissance Society of America (2003, 2010-present)

Société Marsile Ficin (2000-present)

- **Research Interests**

Sperone Speroni and the defense of ancient sophistry in the Italian Renaissance.

Marsilio Ficino and his Ancient and Medieval sources.

Christian-Muslim relations in the Renaissance.

Dante and his legacy: language, poetry, and politics.

Literature, philosophy, and medicine in Middle Ages and Renaissance.

History, literature, and philosophy in the twentieth-century Italy.

- **Publications and Talks**

Book

Medicina e filosofia in Marsilio Ficino. Il Consilio contro la pestilentia, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2007.

Abstract: <http://storiaeletteratura.it/medicina-e-filosofia-in-marsilio-ficino/>

Articles and Book Chapters

“Marsilio Ficino, *De Christiana religione*” in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History Volume Six Western Europe 1500-1600*, eds. D. Thomas and J. Chesworth, Brill, Leiden, 2014 (online version: <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/christian-muslim-relations>)

“Praise and Practice of Medicine in Marsilio Ficino,” in *Medical Ethics and Humanism. Premodern Negotiations between Medicine and Philosophy*, ed. M. Gadebusch Bondio (Villa Vigoni Aurora vol 2), Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014, 109-115.

“Ficino interprete dei dialoghi platonici contro i sofisti,” *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 19 (2013), 47-55.

“Peste (pestis, pestilentia)” (in Campanella’s *oeuvre*), in *Enciclopedia Bruniana e Campanelliana*, vol. 2, Pisa-Roma, Fabrizio Serra, 2010, 312-22.

- "A Humanist confronts the Plague: Ficino's *Consilio contro la Pestilentia*," *Modern Language Notes* 125 (2010, Italian Issue), 72-83.
- "Rassegna ficiniana: recenti studi e ricerche su Marsilio Ficino e la sua opera," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 10 (2004), 169-174.
- "Sulla storia di due 'images' contro i veleni descritte da Ficino," in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism / La tradizione ermetica dal mondo tardo-antico all'Umanesimo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Napoli 20-24 Novembre 2001*, eds. P. Lucentini, I. Parri, V. Perrone Compagni, Turnhout, Brepols, 2003, 613-20.
- "Sulle fonti aristoteliche e platoniche del *Consilio contro la pestilentia* di Ficino," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 9 (2003), 445-51.
- "Marsilio Ficino e la rinascita del platonismo," in *La filosofia del Rinascimento. Figure e problemi*, a cura di G. Ernst, Roma, Carocci, 2003, 29-47.
- "Indice dei nomi" in *Lettture Bruniane I-II del Lessico Intellettuale Europeo (1996-1997)*, a cura di E. Canone, 'Supplementi' di *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, Pisa-Roma, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2002, 309-16.
- "*Daemonica machinamenta* tra Platone e l'Umanesimo: a partire da un passo del commento di Ficino al *Sofista*," in *Arte e daimon*, a cura di D. Angelucci, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2003, 83-96.
- "Il ruolo della *imaginatio/phantasia* in alcuni contesti ficiniani," in *Marsile Ficin ou les Mystères*, Actes du XLII Colloque International d'Études Humanistes, Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de la Renaissance, Tours 7-10 jule 1999, éd. S. Toussaint, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2002, 217-23.
- "Medicina e astrologia nel *Consilio contro la pestilentia* di Ficino," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 7 (2001), 635-44.
- "L'eliocentrismo di Marsilio Ficino nel *Libro dell'amore* e nel *De Sole*," *Itinerari* 40 (2001), 73-90.
- (with S. Toussaint) "Bibliographie ficinienne. Mise à jour," *Accademia. Revue de la Société Marsile Ficin* 3 (2001), 9-21; 4 (2002), 7-18.
- "Bibliografia ficiniana. Studi ed edizioni delle opere di Marsilio Ficino dal 1986," *Accademia. Revue de la Société Marsile Ficin* 2 (2000), 101-36; on-line version: <http://www.ficino.it/intro.htm>
- "*Affectus phantasiae* e destino dell'anima in Marsilio Ficino," *Quaderni di Estetica e Critica* 3 (1998), 71-90.
- "L'inferno interpretato da Marsilio Ficino. Lettura del capitolo X del libro XVIII della *Theologia platonica*," *Colloquium Philosophicum. Annali del Dipartimento di Filosofia* 4 (1997/1998), 187-201.

Book Reviews

- Pietro Pomponazzi, *De Incantationibus*, ed. Vittoria Perrone Compagni, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2011 (review), *Neo-Latin News* 71 (2013), 168-70.
- Laus Platonici Philosophi. Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, eds. S. Clucas, P. J. Forshaw, V. Rees, Leiden, Brill, 2011, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 18 (2012), 657-8.
- J. Prins, *Echoes of an Invisible World. Marsilio Ficino and Francesco Patrizi on Cosmic Order and Music Theory*, Netherlands, Haveka BV Alblasterdam, 2009, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 17 (2011), 287-90.
- L. Lazzarelli, *Opere ermetiche*, a cura di C. Moreschini, M. P. Saci, F. Troncarelli, Pisa-Roma, Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2009, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 15 (2009), 622-3.

- V. Prosperi, *"Di soavi licor gli orli del vaso". La fortuna di Lucrezio dall'Umanesimo alla Controriforma*, Torino, Nino Aragno, 2004, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 11 (2005), 607-8.
- J.-R. Armoghatte, *L'Anticristo nell'età moderna. Esegesi e politica*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2004, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 11 (2005), 604-5.
- Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism / La tradizione ermetica dal mondo tardo-antico all'Umanesimo*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Napoli (20-24 Novembre 2001), eds. P. Lucentini, I. Parri, V. Perrone Compagni, Turnhout, Brepols, 2003, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 10 (2004), 499-501.
- G. Vitali, *Lexicon mathematicum astronomicum geometricum*, ristampa anastatica dell'edizione parigina del 1668, a cura di G. Bezza, Prefazione di O. Pompeo Faracovi, La Spezia, Agorà, 2003, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 10 (2004), 202-4.
- M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, ed. by M. J. B. Allen, J. Hankins, Cambridge (Mass)-London, Harvard University Press, 2001-2003, voll. 3, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 10 (2004), 208.
- G. Campbell, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 10 (2004), 216.
- N. Weill-Parot, *Les 'images astrologiques' au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance. Spéculations intellectuelles et pratiques magiques (XIIe-XVe siècle)*, Paris, Champion, 2001, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 9 (2003), 517-8.
- C. Vasoli (cur.), *Le filosofie del Rinascimento*, Milano, B. Mondadori, 2002, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 9 (2003), 254-55.
- J. Kraye, *Classical Traditions in Renaissance Philosophy*, Aldershot (UK), Ashgate, 2002, *Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences* 53 (2003).
- U. Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, Bologna 1642 [ristampa anastatica della I edizione], Préf. de J. Céard, Parigi-Torino, Les Belles Lettres-Nino Aragno, 2002, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 9 (2003), 250-1.
- D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, Introduction by B. P. Copenhagen, University Park (PA), The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000², *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 8 (2002), 303-4.
- M. Pereira, *Arcana sapienza. L'alchimia dalle origini a Jung*, Roma, Carocci, 2001, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 8 (2002), 312-13.
- P. Magnard (dir.), *Marsile Ficin. Les platonismes à la Renaissance*, Paris, Vrin, 2001, *Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences* 52 (2002), 393-4.
- S. Gentile, C. Gilly, *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Ermete Trismegisto / Marsilio Ficino and the Return of Trismegistus*, Catalogo della mostra tenuta a Firenze nel 1999-2000, Firenze, Centro Di, 1999, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 7 (2001), 294-5.

Conference Reviews

- (with E. Fabbri) "Il convegno internazionale di Torino sulla fortuna di Machiavelli in Europa," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 11 (2005), 625-28.
- "Nello specchio del cielo. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e le *Disputationes* contro l'astrologia divinatoria", *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 10 (2004), 505-7.
- (with S. Plastina) "Il convegno internazionale di Firenze su La magia nell'Europa moderna," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 9 (2003), 521-3.
- "Il convegno di Stilo su Tommaso Campanella e la congiura di Calabria nel IV centenario," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 6 (2000), 211-2.
- "Il convegno internazionale di Tours su Ficino," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 5 (1999), 533-5.

Forthcoming

“Il platonismo politico nell'età della Controriforma: Ciriaco Spontoni dalla *Corona del principe* ai *Dodici libri del governo di Stato*,” *Storia del pensiero politico* 4 (2014) (in press).

“Goffredo and his Army. The Art of Leadership in Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*” in *Books for Captains and Captains in Books: The Training and Image of the Military Leader during the Renaissance*, eds. M. Faini and M. E. Severini, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2015 (accepted).

Marsilio Ficino, *Consilio contro la pestilentia*, critical ed. T. Katinis, Torino, Aragno Editore, 2016 (in progress).

Lectures and Talks by invitation

On Sperone Speroni and the Sophistic Arts. Cenacolo di Baltimora, Fall meeting organized by L. Zarker Morgan. The Loyola University, Baltimore MD (November 14, 2014).

Goffredo and his Army. The Art of Leadership in Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata. Italo-German Conference on *Books for Captains and Captains in Books: The Training and Image of the Military Leader during the Renaissance*. Organized by M. Faini, V. Lepri and M. E. Severini, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, Germany (February 24-25, 2014).

Marsilio Ficino's Medicine: Between Tradition and Innovation. The Johns Hopkins University, History of Science, Medicine and Technology. Colloquia and Special Events. Cosponsored by the Singleton Center for Pre-Modern Europe (April 2, 2012).

Praises of Medicine in Marsilio Ficino's Epistolarium. International Symposium “Medical Ethics and Humanism – Intersections between Medicine and Philosophy” (Como, Villa Vigoni, November 8-10 2010) organized by the Institut für Geschichte der Medizin (Greifswald, Germany).

Peste. VII Seminario di studi per un'Enciclopedia Bruniana e Campanelliana – sezione dedicata a Tommaso Campanella (Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Roma, October 24, 2007) organized by G. Ernst and E. Canone.

Teoria e prassi del sapere medico-filosofico in Marsilio Ficino. XIII Convegno nazionale dei dottorati di ricerca in Filosofia: “La giovane ricerca filosofica a Reggio Emilia” (Università di Modena e Reggio, Reggio Emilia, December 16-19, 2002).

Sulla storia di due 'images' contro i veleni descritte da Ficino. International Conference: “La tradizione ermetica dal mondo tardo-antico all'Umanesimo” (Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Napoli, November 21-24, 2001), directed by P. Lucentini.

Il ruolo dell'immaginazione in alcuni contesti ficiniani. XLII Colloque international d'études humanistes: “Marsile Ficin 1499-1999” (Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance di Tours, July 7-10, 1999), organized by S. Toussaint.

Aspetti della natura e della relazione tra uomo e cosmo in Marsilio Ficino. I International and Interuniversity Seminar in Villa Vigoni (Como, April 26-30, 1998) on “Il concetto di natura nella filosofia del Rinascimento,” organized by University of Budapest, Münster, Roma Tre.

Conference papers presented

Praising the conflict: Sperone Speroni's Dialogo sulla Discordia. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America (New York City, NY, 2014), Panel title: *Renaissance Agon* (organizer: T. Katinis, chair: Ch. Celenza, respondent: P. Ugolini, sponsor: History of the Classical Tradition discipline).

Rhetoric versus Philosophy: Gorgias Redivivus in Renaissance Humanism. Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association (Chicago, IL, 2014), panel: *Renaissance Rhetoric* (Presiding: Eric MacPhail).

The City of Men: Speroni's Rehabilitation of Sophistic Rhetoric. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America (San Diego, CA, 2013), panel: *Rhetoric, Politics, and Ethics in the Italian Renaissance* (organizer: T. Katinis, chair: Ch. Celenza, respondent: J. Monfasani, sponsor: Charles Singleton Center for the Study of Pre-Modern Europe).

“Del comandar sa l'arti”. The Practice of Leadership in Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America (Washington, DC, 2012), panel: *Political and Personal Relations in Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata* (chair: B. Pupillo).

Symbols and Allegories of Politics in Ficino's Works. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America (Montreal 2011), panel: *Politics, Religion and Prophecy: Ficino, Savonarola, the Picos* (chair: W. Stephens; respondent: Ch. Celenza).

Political Issues in the Works of Marsilio Ficino: Translation of Dante, Letters to Pope Sixtus IV, Commentary on Plato's Republic. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America (Venezia 2010), panel: *Ficino V: Political Philosophy, Natural Philosophy and Metaphysics* (chair: Maude Vanhaelen).

A Humanist confronts the Plague: Ficino's Consilio contro la pestilentia. Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America (Toronto 2003), panel: *Platonism under Review II* (chair: Valery Rees).